

ISABEL CARLETON
IN THE
WEST

Margaret Ashmun





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ISABEL CARLETON
IN THE WEST



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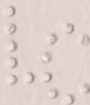
ISABEL CARLETON IN THE WEST

BY

MARGARET ASHMUN

Author of "Isabel Carleton's Year," "Isabel Carleton's
Friends," "Stephen's Last Chance," etc.

*Land of alkali and copper,
Land of sapphire and of gold.
Song: Old Montana*



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TO
MY GOOD FRIENDS
JAY HUGH PERKINS
AND
BERTHA HOLMES PERKINS

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ISABEL CARLETON IN THE WEST

CHAPTER I

WIND FROM THE ROCKIES

IT was late in the afternoon of a day in early summer, and the through train from St. Paul was drawing near to the station in Helena. Two girls were standing in the vestibule of the Pullman car, peering out across the valley on one side of the train; and on the other side catching glimpses of the town, which was set back at some distance against the foot of a mountain.

The fair-haired girl was evidently a newcomer to this region; she had the look of one who continually adjusts her vision to new scenes. The dark girl with the spirited lift of the head expressed rejoicing at being upon familiar ground.

"It looks — er — smaller than I thought," said Isabel, bracing herself against the wall of the corridor.

"But you can't see the town very well from the station," answered Meta. "It's a lot more interesting than it looks from here. I can't imagine why they built the station so far out." She smiled at her companion. "Never mind the town just now.

Look out the other way, and see the Sleeping Giant."

Isabel bent to the window, and gazed across the valley to where a long range of hills had taken the form of a giant slumbering at ease, the various mountain tops forming the outlines of forehead, nose, chin, and breast.

"Some sleep he's takin', I guess," chuckled the porter, who was standing at the door. "I ain't never seen him move, many times as I've been a-past here."

"Maybe you'll see him rise up some day," suggested Meta.

"Land o' livin'! I hope not." The porter looked disconcerted, as if he suspected her of speaking seriously.

Just then the conductor came up behind them. "Well, young ladies, your trip is over," he said genially. He knew Meta's father, and had watched over the girls in their two days' journey as if he had been a discreet and benevolent uncle.

"You've helped so much to make it a safe and happy one," answered Isabel, rather shyly.

"A pleasure." The conductor smiled gravely. The wheels were grinding as the train came to a stop. "There's your father now, Miss Houston," the conductor added, looking over the shoulders of the two girls.

"Nice old Dad," Meta murmured, her face flushing with joy. Isabel Carleton's eyes were upon the attractive well-dressed woman who stood beside Mr. Houston on the station platform.

"Your mother has on the same lovely hat that she wore in Jefferson," said Isabel. But in her heart she

was thinking, "How glad I am to see the dear lady! It's almost as good as seeing my own Mumsey."

The porter swung himself down the steps, with an incredible number of valises hung upon his person. The train ground itself to a standstill. Passengers began to push out from the corridors to the steps.

There was a burst of greetings, laughter, kisses, and hilarity. Isabel and Meta found themselves upon the platform, being embraced by Mrs. Houston, whose husband was now exchanging some jocose words with the conductor.

"How good it is to see you!" Isabel took hold of Mrs. Houston's arm. Meta, after a quick kiss on her step-mother's cheek, had turned to give her father an impetuous caress.

"It's splendid that you could come." Mrs. Houston looked into Isabel's gray eyes with an affectionate glance. "You're both as rosy as dairy-maids. Did you have a good trip?"

"Oh, marvelous!" The girl's face lighted. "I was so interested in everything. And Meta is a handy guide-book in herself."

They looked around for the others. Mr. Houston was slipping a bill into the expectant black hand of the porter. He now beckoned a red-cap to carry the luggage, and he and Meta came back to where Mrs. Houston and Isabel were standing.

"Meta says you had a great journey together," said Mr. Houston cordially to Isabel. "We're tremendously glad you could keep her company."

"I'm tremendously grateful to have had the opportunity," Isabel returned. "I never enjoyed anything more."

Still talking, the party made their way to the automobile waiting at the end of the platform. "I'm so glad the cover's off the car," exclaimed Meta. "I want the whole sky to expand in."

"I thought you'd have some such feeling," commented Mr. Houston.

They all climbed into the car; but Meta stayed her father's hand as he was about to set the machine in motion. "Wait, Dad," she said. "Let Isabel look around."

Mr. Houston turned, with his hand on the wheel. "Welcome to our city, Miss Isabel," he smiled. He was a man of distinguished appearance, with a dark handsome face, and a clipped graying mustache. Meta's spirited look was like his.

Isabel gave him an appreciative glance. "I'm just going to stare around as much as I like," she said. "There's no fun in going to a new place, if you have to act as stolid as an Indian."

"Trust you to see all there is going," laughed Meta, who knew Isabel's eager delight in new landscapes and new experiences.

The flat plain which lay between the city and the Little Belt range was tawny and grayish on the western edge, where the shadows slanted down the mountains. The range itself was glowing with the light which the sunset cast full upon it, giving it an amazing brilliance of crimson and blood-red. The mountains at the north, which were not in the direct line of radiance, showed duller tones of purple and violet and pink.

"I thought I'd seen sunsets," Isabel cried, "but

I believe this is the most glorious I've ever run across."

"We have them all the time like this," remarked Meta with a proprietary air.

"You speak as if you owned them," teased Mr. Houston. "You haven't been here for two years; so we have a larger claim on them than you have."

"Well, I never forget them, no matter how long I stay away," answered Meta, with a fleeting grimace for her father.

Isabel was still looking about, now at the city, huddled against the foot and slope of the mountain; and now at the valley and the ranges beyond. "Have you soaked in enough?" Mr. Houston spoke quizzically to the guest.

"Yes," the girl replied with a sigh. "I think I've had all that I can stand."

The car moved rapidly through the outskirts of the town, and then down the narrow cut where Main Street ran. "This is Last Chance Gulch," Mrs. Houston explained. "See how it winds up between Mount Helena and Mount Ascension." Isabel caught a glimpse of varied business buildings which followed the line of what had once been a deep ravine between high hills. "That's Chinatown up there," Mrs. Houston went on. "It used to be the fine part of the city in the early days, when money flowed like water — or a good deal more freely than water; perhaps I should say as freely as champagne."

They climbed the hill at the other side of the gulch, passed the big white marble Federal Building; turned, followed a street which ascended toward the

mountain, and brought up at last before a huge red brick house, with two odd-looking towers on the front. "This is our boarding-house — the one that Mr. Houston has always stayed at when he has had business in Helena," said Mrs. Houston. "It's called the Wing House,— not because it has wings, but because a man named Wing built it in the middle-early days of glory."

"Do Jonathan and Ah Woo give you as good meals as ever?" asked Meta, as the car stopped.

"Your mother thinks they're all right, and you know she's fastidious," said Mr. Houston.

"Jonathan is a marvel," Mrs. Houston added, as they all alighted from the automobile.

An elderly colored man in a long-tailed coat came down the steps. "Here are our young ladies, Jonathan," Mr. Houston called to him.

The negro blinked and grinned. "I'm lookin' at 'em, suh," he said respectfully. "Of co'se I remember Miss Meta right well."

"Jonathan and I are old friends." Meta smiled brightly at the cheerful servitor.

He began taking the luggage out of the car, and the party mounted the steps to the long hall, where a steep stairway with a highly ornamented railing vanished into the dusk of the upper regions. At the end of the hall, in the shadow, Isabel caught a glimpse of a little old figure in a red flannel jacket and a flapping dusting-cap.

"That's Madam Thatcher," whispered Meta. "Oh, dear, she's gone. I wanted you to see her."

Isabel had heard of the strange old lady from the South, who had somehow drifted out here, and who

was nominally the mistress of the big boarding-house, though in reality it was managed by a devoted darkey and a Chinese cook. The girl craned her neck over the railing of the stairs, in the hope of having another look at Madam Thatcher.

Upstairs, Isabel and Meta found that they were to share a large high-ceilinged room, with the furniture covered with the scrawls and scrolls of the flamboyant period of decoration.

"I've always had this room when I've been here," Meta said, taking a long breath. "I know that you, with your soulful ideas of art, will think it is terribly ugly. But it's been a home to me lots of times, when I really didn't have any."

"You're going to have a real one, now, that your new mother will make for you," said Isabel; "and I love this room because you've lived in it. What do I care about a few curly-cues?"

The two young women had hardly freshened themselves after their long trip, before a gong sounded through the house. "I'm glad to hear it," Meta cried, giving her nose a hasty dash of powder. "I'm as hungry as if I'd never had a bite to eat in my life."

"I'm hungrier than that," Isabel confessed.

They hurried down stairs, into the gloomy dining-room, where vines with dark spreading leaves wandered up the wall-paper, and long velour curtains and lambrequins shaded the windows.

Mr. and Mrs. Houston were already at a small table set for four. From the seat assigned to her, Isabel could see a plot of green grass, where a lawn-sprinkler was whirling, and beyond, a house or two

and the slope of the mountain side. As she unfolded her serviette, she could not help thinking of the time, only a few weeks before, when these same four people had had dinner at the Park Hotel in Jefferson-in-the-Middle-West, and what a trial the meal had been. Meta had assumed such an icy air toward her step-mother that the others had been almost frozen with embarrassment and concern.

"How much better it is now!" Isabel thought, looking affectionately from the older woman to the younger. "And how fortunate Meta is to have such a splendid mother to make a home for her and give her the love that she needs!"

A young colored boy came and took their orders, under the watchful eye of Jonathan.

"Jonathan does everything," Mrs. Houston said presently. "He buys the food, and keeps the accounts, and looks after the guests and their luggage, and attends to the dining-room, and manages Ah Woo, and watches over Madam Thatcher as if she were a baby. He seems to have a dozen eyes and hands."

"He certainly knows how to plan a dinner; and Ah Woo, if that's his name, knows how to cook," said Isabel, who was beginning on the excellent meal which the colored boy set before her.

And now the all-important subject was broached. It had been uppermost in the young women's minds during all the preliminaries. "Well, we have seen the boys," said Mr. Houston. "I suppose I may call them boys, even though they are grown-up young men with work to do in the world."

"I suppose you may," answered Isabel. "Mrs. Houston told me on the way up that you had seen them. She said they were looking awfully well, though not so tanned as they were likely to look before the summer is over."

"When were they here?" asked Meta.

"Over a week ago, wasn't it, Alice?" Mr. Houston responded.

"Yes. There were some letters for you in your room. Didn't you see them?" Mrs. Houston looked disturbed. "I thought they were from Mr. Burnham and Mr. Fox."

"George and Rodney," Isabel corrected her. "No, we didn't see the letters. We were too hungry, I dare say. But they'll wait."

She noted that Meta appeared impatient; Isabel made sly record of the fact in a smile at Mrs. Houston.

"Are they up at the camp now?" Meta inquired, trying not to appear too eager.

"Yes, they went up to get everything into shape — workmen's shacks and so forth," answered Mr. Houston over his roast duck. "You know, of course, that they are to put in an experimental dam or weir, as it's called. It's to test the quality and characteristics of the stream-flow."

"That sounds terribly impressive," said Isabel, smiling. "But what is it for?"

"Oh, a hydro-electric apparatus that's to be installed,— water-turbines and so forth." Mr. Houston's tone implied that it was useless to try to explain such things to college girls.

"They got the letter about the change of plan just before they started from Jefferson," said Meta. "They were rather taken off their feet."

"Rodney told me he was a little surprised, but he didn't say he was disappointed," Isabel added.

"I don't know that George was, either," Meta responded. "He just wasn't quite prepared for the alteration in their plans."

"They'll come out all right," commented Mr. Houston easily. "It'll do them good to figure and sweat a little. There have been times when I've had to, I can tell you."

"How soon are *we* going up to the camp?" Meta could not conceal her eagerness now. Isabel, too, was all agog for the answer.

"Early next week. Things aren't quite ready yet. There are some old prospectors' cabins that we are going to use, and they have to be cleaned and repaired. And of course a good many things have to be sent up. I've planned it all pretty completely," Mr. Houston replied, with an amused glance for the impatience of his listeners.

"That's father, all over," remarked Meta. "He loves to boss people around; and he'll even boss boxes and barrels and trunks and suitcases, if he can't find anything else."

"Perhaps you won't be so scornful of him, when you find how comfortable he's going to make you, up there in the mountains," Mr. Houston defended himself.

"Every few minutes for the last two weeks, he's been jotting down some absolutely necessary thing," laughed Mrs. Houston. "I tell him he will need

a dozen army trucks to get all his paraphernalia up there."

"Don't worry," said *pater familias*, eating away comfortably. "I'm sending things on the train to Martaville, and then Sammis, a man I know up there, who used to work for me, will haul them up to the camp. It isn't far, though it's a bit of a pull."

"I'm dreadfully excited," Isabel burst out. "Wasn't it wonderful that George and Rodney got this chance to come out here, and then that we could all be together, in this magic sort of way?"

"It's mighty fine," said Meta. "But of course Dad's used to managing people's lives for them," she went on teasingly. "He loves to shift 'em around by telegraph."

"It must be splendid to do so much for others," Isabel ventured.

"That's nothing," said Mr. Houston almost gruffly. "The young men will have to make good, on their own account. Nobody can do that for them."

Isabel felt rather subdued. There were times when she was a trifle afraid of Mr. Houston, kind as he was. "Oh, I do hope they will make good!" she was thinking.

"It will do you both good to stay here for a few days," Mr. Houston was changing the subject. "You need a rest after your trip."

"Oh, gracious, father," scoffed Meta, "the trip was a rest, after the whirl in Jefferson,—final examinations, and Commencement, and picnics, and parties, and water-fêtes, and packing, and making the train. We just settled down and simmered in

leisure, when we got safely transferred in St. Paul. We hadn't had a chance to breathe for weeks and weeks."

"Dear me! Do breathe all you like now," Mr. Houston replied. "And anyhow, Isabel ought to see the town."

"There isn't such a desperate lot to see," said Meta; "but Isabel is such a tenderfoot that everything seems thrilling to her."

"I'm a tenderfoot, too, as far as that is concerned," put in Mrs. Houston, who feared that Isabel might find the term displeasing. "Though I've lived on the West Coast for a long time, I've usually gone to the shore in the summer, instead of to the mountains."

"I don't mind being one, at all, if I have such good company." Isabel had grown very fond of Mrs. Houston during the few days when the new step-mother and her husband had visited in Jefferson. Those had been painful days, because of Meta's bitterness about her father's marriage, and her determination not to be reconciled to the usurper.

"We became such good friends in Jefferson that we are willing to be martyrs together," Mrs. Houston said.

"It's too bad you hurried off so quickly after the play," Isabel complained. "You should have stayed to hear the compliments that Meta had on her part in it. She was simply showered with praise, in the newspapers, and everywhere. I suppose she never told you of it in her letters."

"I haven't written any to speak of," admitted Meta, flushing with pleasure at the mention of her

recent successes. "I've depended on telegrams and postal cards to keep up my end of the correspondence."

"I brought some clippings from the *State Journal*," said Isabel to Mrs. Houston. "I wanted you to see Meta's glory actually in print."

"I think it was that fluffy yellow dress that she wore that made the impression on the audience," remarked Mr. Houston, who was tremendously proud of his daughter's triumph in the college play in which she had taken a leading part. "The dress-maker ought to have the glorification, don't you think?"

"Father! How unkind!" Meta's pout was not very convincing.

"She did look lovely," Isabel agreed, "and everybody spoke about it." She was proud of her friend's beauty and distinction. "But after all it was Meta's acting that created the furore."

"And I came so near failing!" cried the amateur actress, with a choke in her voice. "It gives me the horrors to think of it even now. If you two people"—she looked gratefully at Mrs. Houston and Isabel—"hadn't come to my rescue, I should have gone to pieces entirely, and humiliated myself forever."

"Oh, I don't think that could have happened," Mrs. Houston returned; "but it was beautiful that we were able to soothe your nervousness. I feel that you and I just began to get acquainted at that minute; and now we have all summer to renew our acquaintance in," she added more softly. There was a happy light in her friendly blue eyes.

"It seems queer to make the acquaintance of one's mother, when one is almost grown up," faltered Meta, staring absently across the table. She was forgetting to eat, in the absorption of her thoughts.

Mrs. Houston did not reply, but her look of tenderness spoke more than words could have done. The four people were silent as the plates were changed; and their conversation lagged while they ate their dessert.

After they had finished, Meta ran upstairs for the letters, and the others went out and sat on the porch in the dusk, and looked down at the city, now enveloped in deep blue shadows, with the yellow orbs of street lamps shining through. A faint pink reflection still showed on the highest mountain tops. The air had suddenly become cold and bracing, and a keen wind swept the slope.

Isabel felt all at once very far from home, although she was surrounded by friendship and affection. She sat quietly, picturing the later dusk in Jefferson, and the outline of the dome of Main Hall against the sky. And then her mind raced from the college grounds down the leafy streets, to where a white house stood with light streaming from its windows. From the open door came the grave voice of Popsey-Professor, the shrill protests of Celia, who was never ready to go to bed, the coaxing or droll admonitions of Fanny, the "middle" sister; and the gentle tones of Mummy-Carleton.

Isabel felt a lump coming in her throat. Now the distant scene had vanished, and she was on the Wing House porch, with the cold wind of the Rock-

ies stirring her hair and nipping her flesh. She reached for Mrs. Houston's hand.

"Homesick?" breathed the lady, in Isabel's ear.

"No — not with you," whispered Isabel in return. "I was in Jefferson for a minute, and it was hard to come back; but I love the adventures that I'm having, and I love the company I'm in — and I know it's going to be a wonderful summer!"

CHAPTER II

GOLDEN STREETS

“**H**ERE’S that clipping from the *State Journal*,” said Isabel. It was the morning after the girls’ arrival, and Isabel was unpacking her trunk for her temporary stay in Helena. She and Mrs. Houston were in Meta’s big room, where the sunshine had transformed the ugliness of wall-paper and furnishings.

“Oh, yes, I want to see it.” Mrs. Houston took the bit of newspaper, and stood reading it, while Isabel looked over her shoulder. The older lady, in her gown of blue linen, nearly the color of her eyes, appeared very young and lovely. Isabel was taller and more slender, with the less settled aspect of youth.

“It says just the things that one likes to have said.” Isabel was eager and breathless. “Did you notice that about the ‘reserve’ and ‘dignity’? That’s fine, isn’t it?”

“It’s just what *we* said,” smiled the step-mother. “Those were the things that we liked best about her acting.”

“I heard it remarked more than once,” Isabel went on. “People were really very enthusiastic, and you know a college crowd is likely to be dreadfully critical.”

Mrs. Houston sighed happily. "It's such a satisfaction to see Meta do well," she said. "She has great possibilities, I think; but she has been in danger of letting mere temperament overrun all her other qualities."

"She'll never be in any actual danger of that again, I'm sure," remarked Isabel thoughtfully. "She's getting a grip on herself."

"Thanks to the Carletons," murmured Mrs. Houston.

"Oh, no! Thanks a little to Mumsey; but not to the rest of us. Meta has a lot of character and good sense herself."

"Anyhow, I'm glad she's at Jefferson, and gratified with her success." Mrs. Houston laid the clipping on the table. "Now for the clothes you brought."

"I don't know that I need all I have here," said Isabel with a dubious face, as she began pulling things out of her trunk. "One always takes too much."

"Yes, but one never knows precisely what one will need. Anything that you don't want to bother with at the camp — the dressier sort of thing — you can leave here in the clothespress. I see that you have some good thick clothing; that's very sensible. The evenings are cold in the mountains."

"I've discovered that already," Isabel returned. "Here's this green sweater,— and this heavy serge skirt."

"Those are fine. And I do hope you brought some heavy shoes. Girls — even young ladies as old as you — are so foolish about shoes, some-

times." Mrs. Houston spoke with the wisdom of one whose life had been closely associated with girls of all ages.

"I think I'm old enough to be sensible," Isabel responded, "though you may be sure that Meta and I are not going to act like grown-ups this summer. Look at these,—high and heavy and brown, with low heels." She held up a stout pair of boots. "Stubby but smart, I call them."

"They're perfect to wear in camp," Mrs. Houston conceded.

"And here are some pumps to rest my feet in, after hikes and climbs; and here are some blouses and a linen skirt or two for warmer days."

Mrs. Houston was hanging the jersey and the serge skirt in the closet. "You brought some frilly things, too," she said. "I see them peeping out of that tray."

"Mother thought that some occasion might arise when I should need them."

"Indeed, yes; especially if you go on to Seattle with us after our camping expedition is over."

"If I do. I know I should love it." Isabel was taking out a white frock of soft embroidered voile.

"Ah, that's the sweet little gown that you wore with the turquoise blue sash on the night of the play," Mrs. Houston said.

"The same. My wardrobe is limited. And look. I'm not altogether frivolous. I brought some of my tools along so that I can do some craft work if I get a chance."

"A nice industrious idea. I see that you have no notion of wasting your summer."

"Not I. I thought I might do a few things and sell them when I go back. You see how frightfully commercial I've grown." Isabel flushed. "Well, materials are so expensive, and besides I want to buy some books of instruction, and some books on designing and old jewelry."

"Those are high-priced on account of the plates."

An expression in her companion's eyes made Isabel protest hastily: "No, you're not to give them to me. I want to earn them myself."

Mrs. Houston laughed. "You're a mind-reader," she said. "I was thinking that I'd allow myself the pleasure of buying them for you. But you're right. It's ever so much more fun to earn things than to have them given to you."

"That's one reason why you want to keep on with your school, isn't it?" asked Isabel sympathetically. She paused with a lace camisole in her hand.

"One of the chief reasons." Mrs. Houston took up an embroidered collar, and turned it unthinkingly in her fingers. "Of course I love the girls and the work, too. Mr. Houston isn't quite converted yet to the idea of my going on as director of the school, but I'm hoping that he will be, by fall. Men are so strange: he'd like to set me up in a big handsome house, and have me go in for bridge-parties and pink teas, though he despises that sort of thing himself."

"It would be horribly dull for you, after being interested in the *real* things to have to pretend an interest in the frivolous ones." Isabel tied a bow in the pink ribbon of the camisole.

"Yes, it would, truly. I don't think I could stand

it. I like a little frivolity and diversion as well as any one, but for a steady diet I'm sure I should find them inexpressibly tiresome."

"You wouldn't be contented not to be doing something for somebody. And oh, while I think of it, I must tell you how delighted Sylvia Calderwood was when I gave her the money from the Fund to pay her expenses during the summer session. You know Harriet Plover gave fifty dollars — it was a real sacrifice for her — and then your check made just what we needed." Isabel's eyes shone. The Molly Ramsay Fund for helping girls through college was one of the important things in her life.

"I'm very glad that the poor child didn't have to renounce her diploma for the want of a little money." Mrs. Houston was speaking of Sylvia Calderwood.

"Just think! It made all the difference in the world to her — the difference between getting her diploma and leaving college without it. She feels so relieved and consoled; she's like another girl, — not so sad and scared-looking. Isn't it queer that a little slip of blue paper should have such an influence on a person's whole career?"

"It isn't the slip of paper; it's the thought behind it." Mrs. Houston put down the embroidered collar, and took up a gray linen skirt which Isabel had thrown over the foot of one of the beds.

Just then Meta tapped at the door, and came in. She was freshly dressed in a white shirt-waist and plain skirt. "Well, Isabel, you certainly have got pretty well unpacked," she said. "But then, m-mother's been helping you." She hesitated a

trifle on the word *mother*, for she had not yet become accustomed to using it. "I'm going to get my trunk emptied, too. There'll be a lot of things that I won't want to take up to the camp with me." She drew back the lid of her wardrobe trunk, and began taking out dresses and skirts and blouses, and piling them on her bed. "It's strange," she said, frowning, "how messy things look, when you take them out of a trunk, no matter how scientifically they are packed."

"Yours are in much better condition than mine," said Isabel, "because I have just the ordinary old-fashioned trunk."

"I'll get my electric iron," cried Mrs. Houston, "and we'll have all these pretty things freshened up in two minutes. You'll both need them for over Sunday. I'll put my ironing board on these two chairs."

"Let me bring the board." Isabel sprang up from where she had been rummaging in the bottom of her trunk.

They soon had the board laid out and the cord of the iron attached to the ornate brass chandelier. "Bring on the 'wrinkledest' things first, and I'll show you what an experienced presser can do," said Mrs. Houston merrily. "I've often thought I ought to be a tailoress, because I love to press things and make them all smooth and perfect."

They were chatting and laughing, when an inquiring *miaouw* sounded at the door. A big black cat appeared, his tail in the air, his yellow-green eyes fixed trustfully upon the group.

"Ah, the old dear!" Isabel cried. "Where did you come from, Bright-eyes?"

"That's General Robert E. Lee," Meta explained, sorting out gloves of silk and cotton and kid. "He belongs to Jonathan."

"Come on in," invited Mrs. Houston, looking over her shoulder. "He's very top-lofty, and it's a great compliment if he takes any interest in a stranger."

"Cats and I are never strangers," answered Isabel. "Come on in, old Tootles. We love you, so don't be alarmed."

The cat came slowly in with another interrogatory *miaouw*, and sniffed about at the clothes and shoes lying here and there. Then he jumped to the table, where he regally permitted himself to be caressed. Isabel put her arm around him, and laid her cheek against his fur.

"You look like a picture in an art exhibit," commented Meta, "with that pale green chambray dress, and your gold hair, and the black cat in your arms."

"Futurist or cubist, or something like that, I suppose," murmured Isabel, stroking the puss, who purred loudly and rubbed against her shoulder. "I was homesick for our Bobo, I believe; and General Robert E. Lee sort of takes Bobo's place."

"Just as Meta and I take the place of your mother and Fanny," Mrs. Houston suggested.

"I'm pretty fortunate to have such satisfactory substitutes for my relatives, human and feline," Isabel replied.

"M-mother and I don't know which class we go in," said Meta.

"That remark classifies *you* as feline," Isabel returned quickly, "but your mother gives every indication of being human."

"Then she'll be interested in these books that I sent on by express," said Meta. She was leaning over a box in the corner. "Jonathan loosened the cover. Isn't he the most thoughtful thing?" She took some books out of the box and laid them on the table. "See, mother," she said, using the name as easily as she could, "here are my books on the history of the stage, and the lives of famous actors; I'm going to read them this summer. Mrs. Carleton gave me the idea. She said I'd gain a 'cultural background' from them; and I was only surprised that I hadn't planned some organized reading like that, before. Don't they look interesting?"

Mrs. Houston took up the attractive volumes one after another. "Delightful," she said warmly. "I'm glad you're going to make your summer profitable as well as amusing."

"I couldn't do otherwise with Isabel around," Meta confessed. "She doesn't believe in wasting a vacation. She studied all the time she was in Europe, you know, and made up a whole year's work in languages when she came back."

"I had good tutors, and every opportunity to learn," Isabel protested, feeling a trifle self-conscious at being praised for her industry; "I'd have been a 'bonehead,' as the boys say, if I hadn't learned a thing or two. And as for this summer, I'd be

ashamed to idle around all the time, when George and Rodney are working so hard."

"I should too," said Meta. "I'm going to do my voice exercises every day; and remember we're going to do French conversation at least half an hour every day, Little One."

"No less," Isabel assured her cheerfully.

The work of pressing and sorting clothes, and hanging them away in the roomy closet went on in the midst of a flow of talk about college and Jefferson, and summer plans, and "the boys."

"Rodney and George are probably having the time of their lives up there in the mountains," meditated Meta. "Their letters didn't say much, but I know they're both crazy over being outdoors all summer, and getting all this experience, too."

"It means a good deal to them," said Isabel, with her forehead puckered. "It's quite an undertaking for them to put this piece of work through, when it's so different from what they expected."

Meta looked serious, too; but when she glanced at Isabel's worried face, she burst out laughing. "Dear me, Goldilocks," she exclaimed, "any one would think that you were the Head Engineer of the American Continent, and that the affairs of the nation depended on you. Don't take so much on your own shoulders. Those two men have had seven years (adding four and three) in an engineering school, and if they can't do what's expected of them, it's time they found it out and suffered the consequences. Father says it isn't a difficult piece of work, anyhow."

Isabel's tensivity relaxed. "Of course that's true," she sighed, "and I'm a fuss-budget, I know. I do wish I could learn to let things work out, instead of fretting over them."

"We've nearly finished, now," said Mrs. Houston, looking around the room. "Suppose we put away our iron, and go down town before luncheon. I think I heard you both say you wanted to buy a few little things."

"Yes; ink, and shoe-polish, and some postal cards," said Isabel.

"Soap and hairpins," supplemented Meta; "and a magazine, and some stamps."

"Then we'll go. Isabel hasn't seen our village yet, except the glimpse from the car last night, and the view from the front porch."

They hurried to make themselves neat, and started out for the walk down the hill and into the gulch where Main Street had been built.

In the upper hall, they met Madam Thatcher. She was strangely clad in the red dressing-jacket and a white dusting-cap. "Good morning, Madam Thatcher," called Mrs. Houston.

"Good morning, dear." The ancient lady turned toward them a gentle bewildered face.

"I'm Mrs. Houston," reminded the speaker quietly.

"Oh, yes. I know you, of course." A light came into the faded blue eyes. "You must forgive an old lady for being dull." The words were spoken with a grace of manner which recalled the elder days of courtesy. "And this is your daughter. I've known her for a long time, but she stays

away — ” The voice grew vague, and the eyes wandered.

“ Yes, she’s in college, you know,” said Mrs. Houston. “ This is one of her college friends, Miss Isabel Carleton.”

“ I’m glad you’re here, dear.” The old lady smiled at Isabel, and quite unexpectedly put out her hand. It was soft and blue-veined; on one finger shone a great diamond in an old-fashioned black enamel setting.

Isabel loved old people. She felt a throb of pity and affection for this aged creature, as she pressed the aristocratic white hand.

They went on down stairs. “ She’s a dear old thing,” said Isabel in a low tone.

“ Yes, very gracious and charming,” agreed Mrs. Houston. “ But she doesn’t see very well, and she confuses people. She comes of fine Southern stock, they say. And ‘ they say,’ too, that she has quantities of lovely things — clothes and laces and jewelry — left over from her former splendor, and that Jonathan will never let her sell one of them, but insists on providing for her by keeping this boarding-house. He’s one of the house-servants that she had in the South — descended from the slaves that the Thatchers had before the Civil War.”

“ It’s awfully interesting and romantic.” Isabel liked a picturesque situation, and here was one quite to her mind. She thrilled as she went out from the towered house into the bright sunshine of the June day.

Across the city and the flat Prickly Pear Valley, the mountains were blue and clear-cut against the

sky. Near at hand, a few trees bordered the sidewalk — not the huge elms and maples of Jefferson, but small box elders and cottonwoods. The houses were well painted and carefully kept.

"These are literally the golden streets," remarked Mrs. Houston as the trio approached the busier thoroughfares. "Mr. Houston tells me that there is a good deal of gold right under foot. Every time the foundation of a building is dug, the small boys hang around to hunt for nuggets."

"Imagine it!" The tenderfoot was much impressed.

"Chinamen still do a little placer mining on the very edge of town, over there," said Meta. "They can always wash out a thimbleful of dust. You know this used to be one of the richest towns in the world, and one of the most exciting. Probably you've heard the stories about the desperadoes and the Vigilantes."

"Only vaguely," answered Isabel. "I'd love to hear all about those wild old days. The town looks disappointingly calm and law-abiding now."

"I suppose you'd like to have a lot of drunken miners come galloping in and shoot up the town, or hang some one for your amusement," Meta suggested.

"No, hardly. But I am frightfully fond of 'atmosphere.'"

"There's a lot of that. I never breathed more exhilarating air," said Mrs. Houston.

"Oh, is that a cow-puncher?" Isabel indicated a fantastic being in goatskin "shaps" dyed a bright yellow, waistcoat open from neck to hem, and gray

flannel shirt. He had a bright handkerchief around his neck, and a "Stetson felt" on his head.

"Yes. One doesn't see them often on the street," returned Meta easily. The delight of these well known streets was keen to her.

Isabel stared at two Chinamen in black brocaded tunics and woolen slippers and round hats. They glided noiselessly along, engaged in their queer gobbling conversation. Then came a lounging figure in a green velvet "vest," and high-crowned hat, and gay-colored kerchief.

"Mexican," Meta explained, following Isabel's eye. "Scarce as hen's teeth."

There were numbers of well dressed people going back and forth, but Isabel regarded them with a disappointed air. She was happier when she saw a "real live Indian," even though he was decked out in ill-fitting "store clothes," except for his beaded moccasins.

"There is a good deal of picturesqueness left," said the newcomer, "even if most of it is hopelessly conventional and modern."

"It's only the silly Easterners that expect an up-and-coming city like Helena to be seventy-five years behind the times," Meta remarked with scorn.

Isabel felt subdued, and looked about furtively for "local color," without daring to comment on it when she found it.

The three women went into various shops and made their purchases. Every time that they came out upon the street, Isabel took new pleasure in the sight of Mount Helena rising above the town, and the more distant blue ranges which encircled it.

"I wish mother could see this," she said under her breath. "How she would love the color!"

They were passing a jewelry store, when Meta cried, "Oh, Isabel, let's go in and see whether you can get some unset Montana sapphires at a reasonable price. You know you like my ring, and you've often said you wished you could get some stones of that sort to work up in your silversmithing."

"I'd be overjoyed," said Isabel hesitatingly, "but I'm afraid they'd cost too much."

"Let's go in and see, anyhow," Mrs. Houston encouraged her.

They went in and asked to see the stones. The proprietor laid some of the sapphires out on a black velvet pad for their inspection.

"What lovely color!" they all exclaimed. The clear pale drops sparkled on the dark background, and Isabel could not keep her eager fingers from them.

"They're exquisite," said Isabel. "I should love to try to set them. I make hand-made jewelry," she explained. "How much are they?" she asked after a pause.

The jeweler named a figure which seemed prohibitive to Isabel. Her face fell. "I—I think they're too dear for me," she faltered. "I'm sorry, but I won't take any. I shall have to go on making things with abalone shells and agates and moonstones."

"Well, those are very pretty," said the man politely, "but I'm sure you'd enjoy working with these."

"I'm sure I should," said Isabel regretfully. She

laid down the two stones which she had been examining. "Perhaps I shall come in again. Thank you very much."

She and Mrs. Houston and Meta walked out into Main Street again. "They did seem expensive for that sort of work," Meta remarked, "and probably you can do better if you watch your chance. Unless you were sure of selling what you made, it would be too much to invest."

"I'll live in hope," returned Isabel, who was really more disappointed than she showed. The clear blue stones had bewitched her with their charm. "I do want to make some very attractive things, if I can, and have them ready to sell for the Fund in the fall. We'll need every cent that we can get."

"I believe you'll have what you need," said Mrs. Houston. She glanced at the gold watch at her wrist. "We have just time to get home for lunch. Mr. Houston will be back, waiting for us. And do you realize that to-morrow is Sunday? We'll go to church, and have a calm, leisurely day, and then, on Monday or Tuesday, we'll flit away to the mountains."

"It seems too glorious to be true," Isabel sighed. "I don't know what I've done to deserve such good times."

"That's your old New England theology talking," scolded Meta. "Of course you deserve all the good times you get, and you ought to take them and be joyful."

"Trust me. I'm going to," said Isabel.

CHAPTER III

CABINS IN THE GULCH

“FIVE o'clock,” said George Burnham. “I don't see how they can be very much longer in coming.”

“They're sure to be here within half an hour,” responded Rodney Fox. He put his head on one side, and regarded the canopy of wild clematis draped over the projecting ridgepole of the log cabin before him. “I hope the posies won't fade until after the crowd arrives.” The vines with their delicate purple blossoms were still fresh from recent picking and a sprinkle of water from the stream below. “Pretty scrumptious looking bower, eh, George?”

“I think we've done ourselves proud.” George returned the smile of his companion. “We couldn't have picked out an afternoon more to the Queen's taste, either. It's a great day and a great scene.”

The two young men in corduroy outing clothes, and gray flannel shirts and puttees, stood looking around them at the mountain landscape. All about were the gray- or green-clad hills, some with white tops, and some dulled and vanishing in a mist of blue. The sun was low, and the nearer mountains were already in shadow; the yellow light poured down the valley, where an impatient stream foamed

and chattered and chuckled in incessant sound and motion.

The boys stood on a slope above the stream, and behind them as they faced the valley, a rough cliff arose against the sky. Between them and the cliff were three weather-beaten cabins and a tent. A ravine cut the cliff not far beyond the tent.

"Those cabins certainly fill the bill," commented George as he turned to look again at the three rude structures, as gray and primitive as the rocks behind them.

"The old prospectors who built them built for keeps," said Rodney. "We're indebted to them for our palatial residences, and they themselves took their departure to the Lord-knows-where, a good many years ago."

"I suppose they've struck 'pay-dirt' in the golden streets, long before this," answered George more seriously than his words would indicate. "But they had a great life while it lasted — full of adventure and expectation."

"I hope some of it was realization, too," said Rodney. "It's thrilling enough for a while to be on the still-hunt for a fortune, but it must be monotonous to go on for years and never strike it rich."

"The hotel clerk in Helena told me about an old man nearly eighty-five years old," George replied, "who was still seeking for a pay-streak over there in Confederate Gulch a few years ago. He lived alone in a cabin like these, but in the winter the ranch people would take him in and keep him. Early in the spring he'd be out and at it again. He never gave up until the last."

"It gets to be an obsession," meditated Rodney. He came back to the present situation. "It was fine that the tent fitted in so trig between the cabins and the ravine. I'm glad that you and I are to sleep under the canvas, too, for I should hate to be shut up with doors and a roof, even in a cabin, while we're out on this adventure."

"Ha! I have an idea," exclaimed George.

"Hold it hard," Rodney warned him. "You may need it in your business."

"Perhaps I'll get another sometime," George retorted. "I'll take a chance on it."

"Then divulge the secret."

"Let's put up signs showing which cabin is which. The cook-house can be Delmonico's."

"Oh, say! that's not bad at all. The bower for the girls can be the Ritz-Carlton."

"Hey, some joke for Isabel."

"I didn't mean to pun, but all the better. The Houstons' hut can be the Waldorf."

They ran to the tool-shed at some distance down the bank for paint and shingles. In a few minutes they were nailing up the neatly lettered signs over the doors of the cabins, among the drooping tendrils of the clematis.

"And now our tent; we've got to have a name for that," frowned George, standing with hammer in hand.

"Let's call it the Hermitage," suggested Rodney.

"That's the men's hotel in New York, isn't it, on Broadway somewhere?"

"Yes; that's one place where the men have things all to themselves."

"It'll be a polite fiction in our case, inasmuch as the tent has got to be the family sitting-room in the daytime."

"Well, never mind," Rodney answered. "Maybe it will be a hint for the family to clear out when we get to nodding after our day's work."

They prepared and nailed up the last sign; and then the two young engineers sat down on a rock to wait. Their faces grew sober as they contemplated the stream. The weir which they were to build was to measure the force of the river and to bind its power to be the servant of men.

George Burnham was broad shouldered and strong, with keen blue eyes and auburn hair, thick and rebellious. There was a frank and wholesome air about him which made him welcome in any circle. Rodney was slenderer and more reserved, with brown hair and straightforward hazel eyes. As the young men sat silently on the rock, they were both brooding on the work which lay before them. Their boyish jesting had given way to serious contemplation.

"It isn't any harder than the railroad work would be," said Rodney after a while, "now that we're started at it. I'm glad I had that hydraulic course with Carmichael."

"We're certainly safe in choosing that spot for the weir," George replied, returning to the subject on which the two had spent the larger part of the day. "The narrowness of the stream, and the nearness of the sand for our concrete —"

They went on talking over for the fiftieth time

the possibilities of the place upon which they had settled for the building of the dam.

"Bossing those Greasers and Dagoes will be a job in itself," Rodney said, throwing pebbles down the slope into the water. "You've had a little experience in bossing a stenographer or a janitor, but I'm like a babe in arms."

"Babes in arms can be bosses, all right. I've seen 'em run a whole block. All they have to do is to yell loud enough, and they get what they want."

"I guess I can do that," grinned Rodney. "I'll yell like a Comanche, if that will do the trick."

The shadows of the mountains had grown longer, and the stream was losing the golden flecks which had been scattered among the ripples. The mountain tops were turning pink as the sun sank.

"Hark! a sail on the horizon!" This from George.

"They're coming at last," exclaimed Rodney.

They started up, alert and glowing. The rattle of a vehicle became distinct in the air, and the impact of horses' hoofs upon the road. The sounds grew nearer; and then up the valley and into sight beyond the turn of the cliff and ravine came a small procession in the full light of the sunset.

First came a buckboard drawn by mules and driven by a man hunched up on the front seat; on the back seat were two women. Then came a man and a girl riding bronchos. The girl sat astride and managed her horse with the ease of the man.

The young men put their hands to their mouths

and whooped a wild *whoo-hoo* of welcome. An answering shout echoed along the valley. Mr. Houston waved his cap.

"Meta rides as if she had lived in a saddle," George remarked with something of pride in his voice.

"She looks like a Valkyrie, or whatever it is," Rodney answered.

"Aha, tenderfeet!" jeered George, directing his jibe at Mrs. Houston and Isabel, riding in state in the buckboard.

"Tenderfeet yourselves." Mrs. Houston shook an umbrella at him in mock resentment.

The two broncho-riders pushed on ahead and dismounted at the foot of the slope. Mr. Houston wore a tweed hunting-suit and puttees, a costume which gave him a dashing Western air. Meta, in red jersey and black skirt and a tilted hat was as usual a jaunty figure.

There was a quick outburst of gayety as the four shook hands with one another.

"Any rags, any bones, any bottles to-day?" called Isabel from the buckboard. She and Mrs. Houston sat among a miscellaneous array of suitcases, bundles, and mysterious knobby parcels.

She and Mrs. Houston alighted amid more greetings and handshakings. It was a happy reunion for the young people. George and Rodney had left Jefferson two weeks before, Rodney having gained permission to leave before the college Commencement. The two girls had stayed on, and journeyed westward at a more leisurely rate.

"We feel like Robinson Crusoes being discovered

on our island," laughed Rodney. "Being up here is almost like being marooned in the Pacific."

"We're as hungry as cannibals," Isabel made answer. "This mountain ozone is the strongest sort of tonic." Her white felt hat and trim serge suit were appropriate and becoming. Her cheeks were redder than usual, and her eyes shone.

"What a wonderful spot!" Mrs. Houston was looking about eagerly at the view.

"I've exhausted every adjective I ever heard of," Isabel complained. "Mrs. Houston and I have shouted out in chorus all the way up from the station. I haven't any words of rapture left. And those two" — she indicated Meta and her father — "have jogged along talking about Edwin Booth or some such thing, as if there were no scenery hung up along the line at all."

"We've seen something like it once or twice before," Meta defended herself, "and even more thrilling mountain-scapes, if the truth were told."

"This is thrilling enough for me," smiled Mrs. Houston.

"Welcome to our home!" George and Rodney stood bowing at each side of the door of the middle cabin.

The signs above the doors now caught the eyes of the newcomers. "The Ritz-Carlton! I know where I belong," Isabel cried gayly. "And what a bower! The clematis is lovely. And these are the old prospectors' cabins that we've heard about. What did they have such long ridge-poles for?"

"To hang the desperadoes on," said Mr. Houston. "The woods — or, rather, the mountains —

were full of them, you know, and hanging them now and then was one of the amusements of the early days."

Isabel hardly knew whether to be distressed or not. Meta laughed scornfully. "Don't be silly, Goldilocks," she said. "He's only fooling you."

Mr. Sammis, the driver, a round-faced man in rough clothes, was enjoying the gayety while he unloaded the luggage and parcels. A few bundles he carried into Delmonico's. "Anything you don't know what else to do with you can chuck in the Hermitage," said George.

Mr. Houston's lips twitched as he surveyed the sign. "I've stayed there many a time," he remarked. "I hope the beds are as soft as they used to be."

"Afraid not," Rodney answered. "The best mattresses went into the Waldorf and the Ritz."

The girls were eagerly pushing open the door of the Ritz-Carlton, to see what their quarters were like. The floor and the windows had been renewed, and now glowed in fresh cleanliness. At the end of the room there was a crude fireplace, in which a few embers burned. Bright blankets hung against the log-and-mortar walls, and covered the two cots disposed in opposite corners. A pine table, two oak-framed looking-glasses, and a few camp stools completed the furnishings.

"Ah, it's a boudoir!" cried Meta. "And the out-doors has been brought in for us." Great clusters of wild holly and clematis surrounded the mirrors, and a rough earthen jar full of flowers stood on the table, which had a cover of brown burlap.

"A palace!" echoed Isabel. "You've given us all the luxuries," she called to the young men outside.

"All the comforts of home, but few of the luxuries," George replied. "In fact, you're reduced to the level of the Indians, I fear."

"Then we're Indian princesses," said Isabel.

"Even Indian princesses don't have white-tiled bathrooms at their disposal," George returned, "and they experience a sad lack of spindle-legged dressing-tables and embroidered bed-spreads."

"We can stand it if they can," said Meta from the doorway. "I've often seen them living happily in a teepee, with a blanket and a kettle, and wished that I could reduce things to their simplicity."

"You've got your wish," George responded as he turned away.

In the midst of the gabbling, the luggage and the supplies were disposed of, and Mr. Sammis mounted the seat of the buckboard for his return to the village. "Can he make it in the dusk?" asked Mrs. Houston anxiously.

"The mules are surer-footed than horses, and there's a glow in the sky at twilight, so that it doesn't get dark for a long time," Mr. Houston reassured her.

The girls had taken off their hats, and were ready for further investigations. They quickly inspected the tent, which contained only the two cots on which the engineers were to sleep, a table with a big oil lamp, a few chairs, and a wash-stand behind a bur-lap screen.

"Now for Delmonico's," they exclaimed.

A Mexican *olla* for cooling water hung from the ridgepole of the cabin. "It looks picturesque," said Isabel. "But does it represent our entire water-supply?"

"There's a spring gushing out of the ravine," Rodney explained, "that's as cold as Keeley's lemonade, and the creek out here is always too cool for comfort."

"I think we can get along, then." Isabel was pushing open the door of the cook-cabin. She found a large oil-stove, with an oven, occupying the place of honor along one side wall. Along the other there was a table covered with white oilcloth. All sorts of utensils were arranged upon the walls, on hooks and nails and shelves. Cans and boxes and cartons and bags of food were everywhere.

"No starvation in sight," exulted Meta.

"Mr. Houston evidently thought he was providing for a regiment," said Isabel.

"Dad never does things by halves," answered Meta, "and he's always afraid that somebody's going to go hungry or not get enough to eat."

"No danger, with all these stacks of provisions."

Meta put her hands into the pockets of her red jersey. "Who's cook?" she called, assuming indifference to the reply.

"We are, to-night," George responded. "The rest of you are our guests; but after this everybody'll have to pitch in. You know, we're working men, and not lily-fingered loungers — like some people I could mention."

"Now, George, that's mean," protested Isabel. "We're all planning to work."

"Hemstitch a handkerchief, I suppose, or sew a yard of lace on one of those chiffon waists, or Georgette, or whatever you call 'em."

"More than that," Isabel pouted. "But I suppose we may seem rather idle beside you two slaves."

"We'll argue that some other time. Now, you new arrivals can wander around and look at the scenery until the supper-bell rings. You'll get all the culinary science you want after to-night."

"Are we going to eat in the kitchen?" Meta inquired.

"Not so. You're going to eat under the broad blue sky."

"Well, all I ask is to have it quick," said Meta.

The two girls strolled out behind the tent, and discovered the ice-cold spring, in which the boys had built a covered "cellar" where butter and other food could be kept. The slender rivulet from the spring followed the course of the low ravine, and ran into the larger stream. The girls stepped across this trickle of water, and followed the bank of the creek. It showed a pebbly bottom, with here and there a dark pool where there was a tumultuous swirl.

Around the shoulder of the cliff, the girls came upon Mr. and Mrs. Houston looking at the camp, at some distance away, where the workmen's shacks had been hastily erected. The men were gathered around on the edge of the stream and a Chinese cook came and went, putting things to rights after the evening meal.

"Aren't they an unusually rough-looking lot?" asked Mrs. Houston. "They look like brigands, and I'm more than half afraid of them."

"So am I." Isabel took hold of Meta's arm.

"Oh, they're all right," said Mr. Houston easily. "They look wild, but they're a harmless bunch. Chelford is pretty careful about his workmen. Of course, now that the war is on, he has to take what he can get. But you don't need to give them a moment's thought."

They all turned back, and seated themselves on a rock in front of their own "village," and chatted about the scene and the trip from Helena. The tops of the mountains had now grown redder, and the valley was suffused with a carmine glow.

In a surprisingly short time, the call came for supper. "I hope they've cooked a goose and a peck of potatoes," said Meta, "and a half-bushel of apple-dumplings, and —"

"Don't worry," said her father. "You won't see goose until —"

"Until I look in the glass, I suppose you're going to say," interrupted Meta.

"Until you get back to college." Mr. Houston finished his sentence.

It wasn't goose, but it was fried mountain trout. "Almost as good," condescended Meta; and "much better," declared Mrs. Houston. The table consisted of boards laid on trestles, so that it could be used either indoors or out. White oilcloth served instead of linen, and camp-stools instead of chairs.

The cooks beamed at the praise of their trout and fried potatoes and hot coffee. "What's puzzling me is how we're going to get bread," Meta re-

marked, as she took a fat white slice. "Who knows how to make it, in this crowd?"

"I do," said Mrs. Houston. "I've made many a crusty loaf; but your father has arranged with Mrs. Sammis to send us up bread and cake with the other supplies that Mr. Sammis brings. We don't want the children crying for bread."

"There'll be fresh vegetables and other things," Mr. Houston assured his flock. "I know the appetites of mountaineers."

There was talk of the work to be done, and of the plan for changing off, so that justice might be meted out among the workers. "We mustn't let Mrs. Houston play the slavey for us just because she knows how to do things," said Isabel.

"I don't know how to cook," wailed Meta, laying down her fork. "I'll give you shredded wheat biscuit when it comes my time to cater."

"You should have thought of your qualifications before you joined the party," said Mr. Houston severely. "We'll give you a week to learn, and if you don't rise to the occasion, out you go."

Meta glared at him apprehensively over her plate.

"Isabel's a shark at cooking," spoke up Rodney. "She can make anything, from soo-flay to head-cheese."

"Oh, Rod, I can make a few little things, but not much," said Isabel. "You're a shark yourself at flap-jacks. Don't you remember how you made them for the whole crowd out at Lake Kegonsah last fall?"

"Well, I'm a working-man now," Rodney an-

swered. "I can't be a cook or a second girl, much as I'd like to."

The chill of evening settled over the valley, and jackets and sweaters had to be brought before the meal was finished. The dessert was merely a big dish of oranges, to be eaten in nature's simple way.

"We'll wash the dishes," said Rodney. "George and I, I mean. We have two huge kettles of water heating on the stove."

Lamps were lighted in the cabins, and the windows took on a homelike look. The twilight was now deepening into night. Stars came out in the vast blueness above.

"The sky never looked so mysterious before," said Isabel, "nor the stars so golden."

The peaks turned dark, except where one here or there shone a pinkish gray. The rush and humming of the stream seemed more insistent. It sounded like human voices murmuring together and calling unintelligible adjurations.

"Ha! there's a coyote," said Meta suddenly. "I wanted you to hear one, Miss Tenderfoot."

A thin, quavering wail rose among the opposite slopes, and trembled away into a snarl. "Gracious, how badly he feels!" cried Isabel. "He must have lost his dearest friend."

"Or missed his supper," added Mr. Houston.

"What does he look like?" asked Isabel.

"Like a skinny gray cur," answered Mr. Houston. "You'll see one skulking around, some day, and call, 'Doggie, doggie!'"

"I'll run a mile," Isabel replied, laughing.

"Oh, they won't hurt you if you leave them alone," Meta assured her.

"Leave them alone! Goodness, what would I do to them?"

The group took steamer rugs out and spread them on the rocks, and sat looking about, as if they could never get enough of this mountain scenery. A keen wind came singing down the valley.

Isabel shivered. "It must be pretty high here," she ventured.

"Yes; about five thousand feet. The nights are always cool, even cold, though the day may be fairly hot. And there are no flies or mosquitoes," Mr. Houston replied.

"Thank heaven for that," said Isabel fervently. "I've been on camping trips when we were nearly driven mad by both, and nothing could keep them out."

"You won't have any such trouble here." Mr. Houston spoke as if the freedom from pests were somehow due to his excellent management.

Mrs. Houston had been sitting silent, but now she came over and sat down by Isabel. "This is the time of day when you think of home, isn't it?" she said.

"I was just beginning to," Isabel confessed. "I was just thinking about Fanny. Isn't she a dear?"

"She is, indeed; so individual and interesting."

"I tell mother that Fanny is the flower of the family."

"Does she believe it?"

"Of course she does. Poor mother! It must be a relief to have one of her 'trials' gone. I some-

times wonder how she stands us — especially when we get into some quarrel or fuss.”

“I believe I could stand three just like your mother’s three.” Mrs. Houston spoke with unconscious wistfulness.

“Meta would be one of them.”

“Of course.”

“Talking about me?” Meta had caught her name, though the voices were low.

“Yes. Slandering you, you may be sure.”

“I don’t know of two people that I’d sooner trust to talk about me,” said Meta. “I’m afraid that not everybody is so charitable as you.”

Isabel knew that Meta’s proud and indifferent air had elicited some sharp comments from various college girls who judged only superficially. She thought with a twinge of conscience that she herself had once been uncharitable in her estimate of the Western girl whom she had now come to love so dearly. “Well, you must always trust us, and we’ll never say anything unkind,” she responded.

The clatter of pans in the cook-cabin had ceased, and the two young men now came out to join their friends. Rodney sat down beside Isabel. “It’s good to see you again,” he said heartily. “It seems like a long time since I left Jefferson.”

“It’s been interesting, though, hasn’t it?” the girl replied.

“I should say so. I’ve grown a lot and learned a lot. I don’t know when the same length of time has meant so much to me. How were things in Jefferson when you left?”

“About the same. Commencement was a little

duller than usual, I believe. I saw your mother on the campus when the Procession was going on, and had just a word with her," Isabel said. "She was wearing a beautiful pongee gown, all Chinese embroidery or something. I couldn't keep my eyes off it."

"Yes, she had that made before I left. Somebody sent her the stuff from California. Some gay gown, isn't it? Made her look about sixteen."

"She did look young and pretty. She stopped a minute and spoke about you, and said she was glad you could do what you wanted to this summer, because you always fidgeted so if you didn't accomplish something worth while."

"I've got just what I wanted to do," Rodney answered, "and the place that I wanted to do it in; and I've got the best company in the world while I'm doing it. I can't see how I could ask for anything more."

Isabel smiled to herself but did not reply. The night was darkening; the air was full of the murmurings of wind and stream. The stars grew brighter, and the peaks more towering. A deep sense of isolation enveloped the little group, as they sat there in the valley, overshadowed by the majesty of the hills.

CHAPTER IV

A CLOSED CANYON

ISABEL was awakened by a crash of tinware in Delmonico's. Glancing over she saw that the cot on the other side of the room was empty; Meta had dressed and gone. Greatly chagrined at being the last to rise, Isabel jumped up and performed a hasty toilet. In her serge skirt, middy blouse, and high tan shoes, she was ready for almost any domestic or mountain adventure.

As she stepped out of the low door of the cabin, she gave a cry of delight at the loveliness of the scene. The valley and the peaks seemed to have assumed a different character from the one they had exhibited on the day before. Isabel was to learn that mountains, like bodies of water, are never twice the same: they are always changing into new forms of beauty, as if they are expressing an infinitely varied life which underlies them.

Isabel found Mrs. Houston with a gingham apron on over her shirt-waist and short skirt. She was just putting the coffee pot on the table, which still stood out of doors.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed," said Isabel, "I meant to get up and help with everything."

"It isn't late," Mrs. Houston consoled her. "The boys were up early, you know, and out with

the workmen. They got their breakfast at the mess-shack, down below."

"Life is real and earnest for them now, isn't it?" Isabel answered. "Dear me! I wonder if one is always as hungry as a savage, out here in the mountains?"

"I suspect so," said Mrs. Houston. "I have feelings of the same sort, myself. Mr. Houston got most of the breakfast. He knocked down our whole array of tinware, when he was reaching for a frying pan. I suppose you heard the clatter."

"It waked me, or I suppose I'd be sleeping yet. Oh, I smell something appetizing!"

Meta and her father appeared, one carrying a platter of bacon and eggs, and the other a plate of hot toast. "Did the tenderfoot have a good night's rest?" queried Mr. Houston.

"Perfectly splendid, but she's horrified to be the last in such a flock of early birds."

"Well, never mind, you can share the worms," said Meta soothingly.

"They're tempting to look at," laughed Isabel, "and I know I shall gobble like a young robin."

They all sat down, and were soon making short work of the plenteous meal.

"How stuffy dining-rooms will seem," said Mrs. Houston, dropping two lumps of sugar into her coffee. "Just think of having the whole horizon for walls, and such glorious pictures hung all about."

"I don't know that I'll ever be able to lure you home." Mr. Houston pretended to be anxious. "We'll have a dining-room built on the top of the house, if that will do any good."

"Perhaps we'd better wait and see how much I yearn for walls and ceilings, after I've been here a while." Mrs. Houston smiled at her handsome husband, across the white oilcloth table-cover.

"We have a whole day now to fill in," said Meta, who was of a practical turn of mind. "I suppose we ought to lay out office hours, and recreation time."

"That's what the boys have to do," said Isabel. "Their time for work is sacred, and mustn't be broken into. Ours ought to be the same, only, thank goodness, it doesn't have to be so long."

"I dare say we can all — engineers included — have Saturday afternoon off," suggested Mr. Houston.

"I believe that's the rule," Mrs. Houston replied. "And how about the Fourth of July? That's coming pretty soon."

"Everybody ought to get a half-holiday out of that."

"Don't let's work this very first day," begged Isabel. "I'm sure I could never concentrate."

"I have to concentrate at once on some letters and some accounts," said Mr. Houston. "I should have brought a stenographer along, as well as a typewriter, but unfortunately one is not so portable as the other, and you can't shut a stenographer up and shove her under the table as you can a Corona."

"It's too bad that we women are all so useless as office assistants," Mrs. Houston replied. "I can write on a typewriter, but I can't take dictation."

"It won't hurt me to do a little of my own work," sighed her husband. "I've often had to, when I've been traveling, or out in some lumber camp; but I don't mind admitting that it's drudgery. However, I haven't much else to do here, and I might as well be busy."

Isabel and Meta washed the dishes, while Mrs. Houston made beds and disposed of various scattered belongings. She went about driving up nails with a firm and skillful hand.

"Housekeeping is a fairly simple process out here," she said, coming to stand in the door of the Ritz-Carlton, after the girls had finished their tasks in the cook-cabin.

"So simple that you'll get to longing for stuffed sofas and embroidered doilies and a three-mirrored dressing-table," answered Meta.

"Not I. Life has been very complicated for me during the last few years. I'm almost willing to reduce it, as I think I heard you say, to a teepee and a tin pail."

"Luxuries are a burden sometimes," said Isabel, "but I must confess that I do love them. Tell us about your home — or how you lived at your school. Did you have a house or a flat, or what? We had so many things to talk about when you were in Jefferson that we never got through half of them." She seated herself on a cot, while Mrs. Houston took one of the camp-stools.

"I had a suite of my own on the third floor of the school — sitting room, bedroom, and dressing room," Mrs. Houston began. "I furnished them

carefully, a little at a time, as I had leisure and money. I have some lovely English chintzes, for instance."

"The kind with pomegranates and long-tailed birds?" Isabel asked eagerly.

"Yes, and all sorts of impossible fruits and flowers; and I have some nice old mahogany — part of it we had in the family, and part of it I 'picked up' — and some odd jars and bowls, and a Medici print of *Lydia Bingham*; you know, that one with the big hat, and the yellow tones, so warm and glowing. And I always have plenty of flowers in my rooms — something that every room needs."

"I love those things," cried Isabel. As she sat in the rough log cabin, she saw visions of old mahogany and rich-colored chintzes and ancient bowls full of blossoms. A secret longing for a home of her own possessed her, as it had sometimes done before. Then she noticed that Meta was speaking.

"I'm learning to like them, too," Meta was saying. "There was a time, not very long ago, when they didn't mean much to me. I couldn't see why a new Morris chair was just as 'artistic' as some old Colonial one with a reed bottom and painted flowers on the back."

"It might possibly be," said Mrs. Houston; "but the old things were made in a different spirit from the modern stuff that is turned out wholesale nowadays. Then each article had its own individuality."

"Won't it be fun to have a home of your own, for all three of you?" said Isabel. "Do you think you'll have it right away?"

"As soon as we can decide what we want," answered Mrs. Houston, looking at Meta; "that is, whether we'll take a house or only an apartment."

"Which do *you* want?" asked Meta. Isabel marveled to see her so deferential to another person's desires.

Mrs. Houston hesitated. "It's hard to run a house and a school, too," she said thoughtfully; "but your father wants a house, I believe."

"And you want the school. I think," said Meta decisively, "that a woman should be able to go on with her work even if she *is* married."

"Your father isn't converted to that opinion yet, but perhaps he will be." Mrs. Houston spoke with a hopeful smile.

"I should like to hear about your school—how you happened to have it, and all that, if it isn't impertinent to ask," ventured Isabel.

"Some years ago," Mrs. Houston said simply, "I was to have been married. My *fiancé* went to Alaska on business. His ship was wrecked on the coast, and he was drowned." Isabel caught her breath. Meta stared tensely at her stepmother, without speaking. "After that, my mother died," Mrs. Houston went on. "I visited some friends in Seattle, and got interested in their little school. They were giving it up, and I took it over, and went on and developed it. It's three or four times as large as it was. At first, it was merely something for me to think about; but I got so that it meant a great deal more."

"It must have seemed like a child growing up," said Isabel.

"Yes, it was like that. I took pride in keeping my standards high; and I loved the girls, and wanted them to have a natural home life, not just a repressed school existence."

"I wish I had had such a school to go to," Meta burst out. "Father didn't seem to realize ——"

"Men don't always," interrupted Mrs. Houston gently. "We mustn't blame him. A number of my girls are without real homes. Their mothers are dead, or living abroad, or married to second husbands who object to children. I try to make it up to those girls in as many ways as I can."

"I am sure you do," Isabel said, with affectionate earnestness.

"Nothing quite makes up for an individual mother — one's own private property," said Meta in a low voice.

"That's true," Mrs. Houston answered; and then she added after a pause, "Sometimes I feel as if I ought to give up all my time to making a home. But you will be in college another year, and then perhaps busy with your own work, and your father is away so much ——"

"A while ago," said Meta slowly, "I should have thought you ought to do that, too; but I do so want you free to carry on your work. Isn't it fine that you and I have the same ideas about such things?" Her eyes glowed with generous pleasure.

"It certainly is." Mrs. Houghton took the hand of her step-daughter. "We are both interested in the progress of women. I feel that the time will come when all women who are not actually occupied with their own little children will be self-supporting,

no matter how much money they can have from some one else. They will insist on giving something to the world in return for life and happiness."

Isabel always felt a wider sense of living when she was with Mrs. Houston. Her own little problems shrank in importance, and the world seemed larger and more worth while. That was one nice thing about Meta, too, Isabel meditated; she was interested in women's work for one another, and in world affairs, and other things than her own clothes and good times.

She thought about these matters later, as she strolled down to the curve in the cliff, to get a glimpse of the work-camp. Standing in the sunshine, she noted carefully the rough board sleeping quarters, the cook-shack, and the tool sheds. Still farther down the bank, she could see the spot which the young engineers had selected for their weir; George and Rodney and the workmen were grouped about it.

She turned back and investigated again the ingenious cellarette which had been built above the spring, and through which the water flowed. As she passed the Waldorf, on her way back, she saw Mr. Houston sitting in front of the door, with his typewriter before him on a packing-box. His hat was on the back of his head, and he was intent on the keys before him, pounding out rather laboriously the letters which he was used to dictating to a stenographer. "The village" had settled down to quiet, and each person was occupied with a self-appointed task.

While Mrs. Houston and Isabel prepared the simple luncheon, they talked about taking a walk

up the canyon; and after the meal was over, they set out on what was to be, though they did not suspect it, a real adventure.

"We'll give you another chance to go with us," said Isabel to Meta. "Are you sure you don't want to go along?" Meta had exhibited small interest in the expedition.

"No, thank you. I think I'll stay here. Father wants to sleep, and I'll stay and see that he isn't carried off in his slumbers. And as a matter of fact, I must write a letter or two that I've neglected till I'm ashamed of myself."

"Well, we'll try to assuage our grief," Isabel replied.

She and Mrs. Houston started off up the canyon, sauntering along, and enjoying the air and sunlight. There was something to interest them at every step. Their most frequent exclamation was for the forget-me-nots which almost completely covered the dry and pebbly mountain side. Thick clumps of green leaves held great sprays of the blue flowers; not the tiny garden kind, but large perfect blossoms with delicate blue petals and yellow centers.

"I've already found out that Montana is a land of flowers," said Mrs. Houston. "I used to think it a kind of sage-brush desert." She bent over a flat tuft of forget-me-nots, and fingered the alluring blooms. "But it doesn't pay to pick them, does it?"

"No. I often feel like that about flowers," Isabel responded. "They seem to be lovelier in their own place."

The two companions walked along the rudely built road, until they came to the spot where a smaller canyon entered at right angles the wider and more sloping valley through which the stream and the road made their way.

"I wonder whether we ought to venture in here," said Mrs. Houston.

"It's very seductive," answered Isabel.

It was in shadow, even in the bright afternoon. The walls showed layers of soft brown and tan and dull orange and brick red. A trickling rivulet flowed through the sand at the bottom of the gulch, fed by water-drops which sparkled down the rocky sides. A few scraggy pines were outlined, high above, against the sky.

"I can't resist," Mrs. Houston said boldly. "I don't think there can be anything in here that would hurt us."

"Nor I," said Isabel. "And we can't get lost, because we can't get out, and when we turn around we can't go anywhere but back to the main valley."

"Let's call it Magpie Gulch," suggested Mrs. Houston as they walked along. "There are scores of magpies up there among the trees."

"I didn't know what they were." Isabel watched the big birds wheeling about, and caught glimpses of the white feathers under their wings. She was so absorbed that she did not notice that she was nearing the end of the canyon.

"It's a *cul de sac*," cried Mrs. Houston. "And look, there's a kind of natural bench there against the wall. Let's sit down and rest." They had

really come a considerable distance, though they had taken small account of it.

They sat down in the shadowy nook, and looked away down the gulch, where the colored walls were a constant source of pleasure to the eye. Neither had much to say, and they gave themselves up to the peace and remoteness of the place.

All at once, Isabel spoke. "I hear something," she said.

"What sort of thing?" asked Mrs. Houston rather absently.

"Footsteps. Didn't you hear them?"

"No."

"Listen."

They sat perfectly still. Only faint sounds came to their ears, the whirring of the magpies, the tinkle of an infinitesimal waterfall. Then a stone rolled. Isabel's heart gave a jump.

"Mm-m," said Mrs. Houston, easily; "sometimes a stone gets loosened as the sand dries under it, or a bird or a lizard pushes against it."

There was another rattle of stones. "Some one's coming," Isabel insisted. They could see far down the canyon, but a bend prevented their discerning the open end at which they had entered.

"Perhaps Mr. Houston and Meta decided to come, too."

"But they wouldn't know just where we had gone," pondered Isabel.

"They might guess."

The two women sat breathless, neither confessing a fear which was gripping them. They were both so new to these mountain ravines that they would

not have been surprised to see anything emerge from the shadows.

"Oh-h!" Isabel seized Mrs. Houston's hand. A dark form had appeared down the canyon, crawling out from an overhanging rock. "It's a —" Words failed.

"A bear." Mrs. Houston was trying to speak calmly, as became a chaperon of girls.

The bear threw his head from side to side, and then began padding up the gulch toward the intruders.

"Isn't there any way of getting out?" Isabel's voice stuck in her throat.

They looked wildly around. The walls of the canyon rose straight and slippery and impassable. "We can't climb," said Mrs. Houston. "There's nothing to take hold of."

"*What* are we going to do?" Isabel was clinging desperately to the older woman.

"I don't know. There will be something." Mrs. Houston watched the beast as he came calmly on.

"Is — is it a big one?" Isabel queried piteously. It seemed as if she had lost all sense of proportion.

"I don't think it's a — grizzly."

Isabel's heart fluttered at the terrible word. She had not thought of grizzlies. A bear was just a bear to her, and a dreadful creature at that. She saw that the beast was swaying nonchalantly as he proceeded to skirt the tiny stream in the middle of the gulch. Then he stopped and raised his nose and sniffed.

"Could we get past?" Isabel questioned suddenly.

"Not there. He's in the narrowest part of the ravine."

The blood was hammering in Isabel's ears. The sound of crunching pebbles was like the roar of waters. Her lips were saying over and over, "*What shall we do?*"

Now the bear began to concentrate more definitely on the human invaders of his repose. He moved his head uneasily, and lurched along with a curious and uncouth grace.

Cold, spell-bound, the two women watched him. "Oh, Mrs. Houston, can't we climb somewhere? Can't we get away?" Isabel wailed.

"I don't see how." Mrs. Houston's voice was expressionless.

"Isn't there anything we can hide behind?"

"Not a thing. If we get into one of those crevices, we shall be worse off than ever."

The bear broke into a trot, and came forward over the sloping floor of the canyon. Small pine branches from the trees above crackled under his feet. Isabel saw that he was brown, with a thick, almost woolly hide.

"No, it's not a grizzly," murmured Mrs. Houston, as if that fact were of immense comfort. Isabel felt a grim sense of amusement at the words.

The bear stopped and rose on his haunches to survey the two shrinking forms at the end of the *cul de sac*. "We should have got up," breathed Isabel. "We don't dare move now." She stared with fascinated eyes at the beast. He was fat and well-fed. His beady eyes glittered, and his nails gleamed even in the shade.

"Isabel," said Mrs. Houston, just above her breath, as if she feared the bear might understand, "I think there's only one thing to do. If we sit here, we shall go mad. When he gets closer, let's dash out, one on each side of him. He can't get us both at once."

"Oh, I can't!" Isabel shrank against her companion.

"But we can't sit here and let him come right up to us."

"He may turn back."

"It doesn't look like it," Mrs. Houston answered. "We've got to make a dash for it."

"He may run after us," said Isabel tremulously.

"Of course he may. But, Isabel, we've got to *do* something."

The bear now came quietly forward to within twenty feet of them. They could see his cruel little eyes bent upon them, and his wet black nose wrinkling as he sniffed.

"Isabel, we must run," said Mrs. Houston firmly. "You go on that side, and I'll go on this."

"We-ell." To Isabel, her body felt like a lump of lead.

"I'll count. When I say *three*, we run. Look where you're going to run, and then go. Pay no attention to me."

"Oh!"

"One."

Isabel drew a long breath. Her mind grew suddenly clear. She noticed a bald spot on the top of the bear's head, and thought that it made him look like a grotesque old man.

"Two." The women clenched their hands. The bear made a motion toward them, and sat up as if he expected to be spoken to or caressed.

"Three!"

With a leap, Isabel and Mrs. Houston were on their feet, rushing toward the astonished animal. He wavered, and threw out a hasty paw. Isabel was conscious of flashing nails and pointed ears as she flew by. On she sped among the rattling pebbles and crunching twigs. Throwing a glance sideways, she saw Mrs. Houston running on the other side of the tiny stream. Then she looked back. The bear had got down on all fours, and was loping down the canyon. "How easily he does it," thought the girl. "We can't keep this up."

"Don't try to run too fast," called Mrs. Houston. She was panting, for she was less used to exertion than Isabel, who was accustomed to gymnastic drill and dancing. "And we must stay far apart," she added.

Isabel looked back again. The bear was placidly trotting along, not as if he were pursuing them, but more as if he were following them like a dog. "A queer sort of bear," Isabel thought; but her experience with bears had been limited.

When next they looked back, the bear had stopped. "I must get my breath," said Mrs. Houston. She sat on a stone, breathing hard. Isabel stood trembling. For a long minute they rested. Then the bear began trotting toward them again. Thus they went on, running and stopping. The beast seemed uncertain as to whether they were worth following or not. With pounding hearts and

shaking limbs, they accommodated their speed to his.

At last, after endless ages, the opening of the canyon appeared. Making a final spurt, the two women dashed out into the valley, and clutched each other hysterically. Isabel was weak and unsteady; Mrs. Houston, pale and wearied out, sat down and leaned against a boulder. Neither of them said a word.

Isabel could see into the canyon. A chill came over her, as she saw the dark head of the brute appear around the curve. He stood looking for a moment, and then, as if bored by the game, he turned back and was lost to view.

"Oh, he's gone, he's gone!" Isabel gasped. "He isn't coming out."

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Houston sat up, alert and vivified.

"We'll wait and see."

After some minutes of recuperation, during which no pursuing bear appeared, they started back to the camp, walking slowly, with many glances over their shoulders. They saw only the sunshine pouring down the valley, and the yellow glints on the ripples of the stream.

"How brave you were!" cried Isabel.

"We had to do something." Mrs. Houston smiled wanly.

"I should have sat right there till he crunched my feet off," quavered Isabel. "I couldn't have run right toward him, if you hadn't forced me to." She still had tight hold of Mrs. Houston's arm.

"Shall we tell them at camp that we had an adventure?" asked Mrs. Houston.

"It would frighten them, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"Then let's not say anything at first. We'll break it to them 'aisy like,' and not shock them too much."

"We'll have to change the name of that canyon," suggested Mrs. Houston, laughing nervously. "It will have to be Bruin's Bower, or Grizzly Gulch, instead of Magpie Gulch, you know."

"But you said it wasn't a grizzly," Isabel replied.

"No, it wasn't. But we had a grisly time of it, didn't we?"

"We surely did. I don't want a grislier one. We ought to thank heaven that we're alive."

"I do. And oh, Isabel, your hair is all falling down. I never noticed it."

"So is yours. You look like a wild lady from Borneo." Isabel stood still in the road and laughed. "If we went to camp like this, it would be the worst kind of a give-away."

Merry with their relief, they rearranged their hair, and strolled calmly into camp. They were welcomed by a *whoo-hoo*, from Mr. Houston, who was standing in the door of the Waldorf.

"The adventurous tenderfeet now approach," he said quizzically. "Did you have a good 'voyage'?"

"Fine," responded his wife. "We discovered a gulch."

"Did you? What was in it?"

"Oh," her voice wavered — "stones and sticks and a river as big as the flow from a faucet."

Mr. Houston gave the two wayfarers a keen

glance. "Was that all?" he asked, with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, all of any importance, wasn't it, Isabel?" Mrs. Houston's lips twitched.

"I didn't see much of anything else," faltered Isabel. Her adventure was too vivid in her mind to be regarded entirely as a joke.

Mr. Houston took his hands out of his pockets.

"See here. What was in that gulch?" he demanded. Meta had come out of the Ritz and now stood listening.

"What makes you think there was anything?" Mrs. Houston teased him.

"I see it in your faces."

"We must be *bare*(bear)-faced minxes," murmured Isabel, giggling at Meta's look of alarm.

"Was it a bear?" Mr. Houston's voice was stern, like that of a schoolmaster who compels guilty youngsters to confess.

"A sort of one. Well, yes, I suppose one may say it *was* a bear. But wasn't that a nice agreeable place for him?" said Mrs. Houston innocently.

Mr. Houston frowned.

Meta looked horrified. "Did you get away from him?" she burst out.

"Oh, no. We're there yet, patting him on the back." Isabel was amiably sardonic, in her attempt to keep her voice from shaking.

"I mean, *how* did you get away from him?"

"Mr. Bear was so fascinated by us that he didn't know which one to choose," Mrs. Houston answered blithely. "He's still thinking it over, and I dare say he'll make a report."

"If I had been the bear, I couldn't have chosen, either." Mr. Houston's serious face belied his jesting words. "Did he try to attack you?"

"We didn't give him a chance," Mrs. Houston explained. "We made a dash, one on each side of him, and ran for our lives."

"But a bear can run faster than a person," protested the inquisitor. "You must have dashed like the wind."

"We did," asserted Isabel, her chin quivering. "The North Coast Limited wasn't in it with us."

Reluctantly, in answer to questions, the returned fugitives recounted their adventure. Half laughing, but with tears in their eyes, they told of their terror and their flight.

"I want to inquire," said Mrs. Houston at last, "do these mountains swarm with bears?"

"No. One is very rarely seen around here," Mr. Houston returned. "I asked Sammis about that a while ago. This one must have strayed down here from some of the remoter mountains. I doubt if there are any more within fifty miles."

"One is enough," sighed Isabel.

"Now, you two had better go and lie down," urged Mr. Houston. "Alice, you look completely worn out. I'm terribly distressed at your being so frightened. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world." He was still frowning and miserable.

"I'll repair the ravages of the experience," said Mrs. Houston, feeling of her hair, "and I'll sit down for a while; but I'm perfectly all right, Gilbert, and you needn't worry an instant about me."

After they had freshened their costumes, and

rested for a short time, Isabel and Mrs. Houston were quite themselves; though they declined to talk any more about the occurrences of the afternoon. Mrs. Houston had planned the dinner before they went, and she now prepared it, while Mr. Houston insisted on helping as much as his masculine ignorance permitted.

Presently the young engineers came home, exhilarated with their day's work.

"I'm as hungry as a bear," cried George, his face glowing with its recent washing in cold water.

"Don't mention that word here," said Isabel with an involuntary shudder.

"Why not? I suppose the lily-fingered ones object to such rude language from horny-handed toilers."

"Yes, that's it," Isabel agreed. "Our sensitive souls can't stand anything but the most poetic phrases."

"Sorry, but I can't be very poetic till I've consumed a cubic foot or so of beef and potatoes," growled George. "Then perhaps I can talk about the star-rs and the r-rippling str-reams, and the up-lifting of the masses. Just now I'm a wild animal on the track of a square meal."

"Ugh! Don't gobble me. Come and sit down and eat what's on the table." Isabel hurried the party into their seats.

"Well, how did you get on to-day?" inquired Mr. Houston of the laborers. He had been adjured not to mention bears at the table.

"Finely," answered Rodney, his eyes glowing with satisfaction. "I've talked more with my hands

to-day than I've ever talked in a week with my tongue. We think things are going pretty well."

The conversation became general, and Isabel was relieved not to have to rehearse her experiences.

After dinner, Isabel and Meta washed the dishes. When they came out to join the group in front of the village, Rodney came over to Isabel and said fiercely, in a low voice, "What's this about you and a bear?"

"Who told you?" parried the girl.

"Mr. Houston whispered something to George, and he hinted it to me."

"Oh, well, if you want to believe such gossip —" Isabel began.

"Come, now, Isabel," pleaded Rodney, "don't be flippant. Were you scared? Were you in danger? Did you get hurt?"

"I was a little scared, but I don't know that I was really in danger, and I certainly didn't get hurt. Please, I can't talk about it now, Rod. I've stood all I can."

"All right, if that's the way you feel. But I'm horribly sorry you had such an unpleasant experience, and in the very first part of your stay here, too." He looked worried, and spoke as contritely as if he were to blame for the entire episode.

"Dear me, I shouldn't want to come away out here into the mountains and not have any hair-breadth escapes at all. One might as well stay at home, if one isn't going to have any thrills," said Isabel. "There's no use in fussing." And then to change the subject, she began talking about the other side of the stream. "Beyond the Alps lies Italy.

It's too bad that we can't get across the river here. That's the most delightful looking meadow on the other side, and there's hardly any grass on this side at all, — I mean, really fresh green grass."

"The grass always looks greener when it's a long way off," commented Rodney wisely.

"But that grass is," persisted Isabel.

"We could have a bridge, I suppose. Hey, George, what do you say? Shall we build a narrow foot-bridge here for our lady friends to trip across without wetting their dainty feet?"

"That's a good idea," answered George, who was lying at ease with his hands under his head. "We'll do it in our first spare minute."

"It will be glorious to enter the Promised Land. We can have picnics over there," Isabel remarked.

"But it's no picnic to get there, if you have to build your bridge first," responded Rodney frivolously.

"I don't see how we can expect the waters to open and let us through," Isabel replied.

"They surely won't if you don't expect them to."

"If you boys build a bridge, that will be almost as much of a miracle," was the answer. "It requires all my faith to get that far."

"You'll see what we'll do," said Rodney; "but we look to you for encouragement instead of jibes."

"You'll always get encouragement from me," said Isabel soberly.

"I'll count on it," said Rodney.

CHAPTER V

THE BIG INDIAN

ON Thursday morning, Mr. Sammis arrived with supplies, and with a bunch of letters and papers for the camp.

Isabel took her letters eagerly, and stared at the addresses and postmarks with foolish delight. "It seems as if we'd been wafted to another planet; things are so different and so absorbing," she said. "I feel just as I used to in Europe — only sometimes when we were moving around, it would be days before we'd get any mail at all. That was rather dreadful."

"I should say so," answered Meta absently. She was tearing open an envelope. Mr. Houston had thrust his letters carelessly into his coat pocket, and was talking with Mr. Sammis. Mrs. Houston was reading a postal card, and giving a divided attention to what the two men were saying.

Isabel ran hastily through a letter from her mother; they were all well at home, and still in Jefferson because of the summer session; the weather was warm; Fanny had a new muslin dress which she very much needed; strawberries were terribly high, and strawberry jam would be scarce next winter in the Carleton larder; Mrs. Mitchell had invited a few people in for Saturday afternoon; and so on.

The lines brought up in Isabel's mind the picture of summer days in Jefferson: the heated air quivering in open spaces at noon-day; the shaded residence streets, with damp green lawns; whirring electric fans; porch parties; thin, delicately colored dresses; fingers busy with embroidery or knitting; cool drinks with ice tinkling against the glasses. It was all so familiar and so attractive that Isabel had a momentary twinge of loss. "I do think it's a lovely home life," she sighed; "but I'm glad I'm seeing a different kind of existence, just the same."

She was stifling the twinge at her heart, when she heard Mr. Houston say, "Well, people, Mr. Sammis says he has time to go up to the Big Indian mine this forenoon, and I think it would be a fine thing for our tenderfoot friends to see it. Do you want to go — Alice, and Isabel?"

"I'd be overjoyed," said Mrs. Houston quickly.

"And I, too," echoed Isabel. "You know I love to see everything."

"Meta and I will go on horseback," said Mr. Houston. "You two can ride with Mr. Sammis in the buckboard. Come on. How long will it take you to powder your noses?"

"As long as it takes you two men to get the parcels out of the buckboard," answered Mrs. Houston.

In a few minutes the cavalcade had started. Meta rode ahead, holding herself gracefully erect. For some distance, while the road was wide enough, Mr. Houston rode beside the buckboard, in which Mrs. Houston and Isabel sat.

"There's something wonderfully exhilarating

about a morning in the mountains," Mrs. Houston remarked. "You feel a sort of exultation in every smallest thing."

"And there's such a gold light over the world," said Isabel.

"The State seal has for its motto *Oro y plata*," said Mr. Houston. "That's Spanish for *gold and silver*, you know."

"I've heard of that," Mrs. Houston answered. "I like to think that it means more than merely metals and riches. The people out here seem to be what one calls sterling — that's the silver; and they have a true cordiality and sincerity, which is gold."

"That makes the motto seem more significant," Isabel assented; "but I like it anyhow. It suggests the romantic explorers, and the adventurers who came in the gold rush, and the picturesque characters of the mining camps. And wouldn't it be exciting," she went on, "to have a glimpse of the early days — the great fortunes made in no time, the gambling, and the wild acts of the desperadoes —"

"It would be rather more than you could stand to see the last acts of some of those dramas," Mrs. Houston put in with a meaning look. "You'd find them too much for your nerves, my dear."

"But some people saw them," argued Mr. Houston, bringing his horse closer alongside the buckboard.

"I don't know how they stood it," his wife replied. "They must have had stronger souls than we have nowadays."

"Possibly they did. But look at what is going on in Europe. How do people stand those things without going mad?"

"Some of them do go mad, I expect."

"Yes. But many of them endure."

"I suppose we can all stand a good deal more than we think we can," admitted Mrs. Houston; "and the pioneers would think us unnecessarily sentimental and squeamish, I'm sure."

"I sometimes wish I could get into that *mêlée* in Europe," Mr. Houston said thoughtfully. "The United States will have to get into it pretty soon; but I dare say they'd tell me I was too old."

"That makes it easier for me to think I could be a Spartan wife, and let you go." Mrs. Houston smiled sadly at her husband. "But I can't help thinking of the women in Europe —"

"One can't think of them." Mr. Houston tightened his clutch on the reins, and his face darkened. "Thinking is what makes one go mad." The road grew narrow, and he urged his horse ahead so that he might ride with Meta.

Mrs. Houston and Isabel looked at each other understandingly as they approached the mouth of the canyon where they had had their adventure of the day before. "Grizzly Gulch," said Mrs. Houston in a low voice.

"Hair-breadth escape of two hare-brained tenderfeet," murmured Isabel. They both shuddered. The encounter with the bear had been in reality very terrifying.

"Our friend Bruin appears to be in hiding."

They looked up the gulch. It was shadowed and peaceful. A few magpies were wheeling about, "showing the white feather," as Isabel had said.

For some miles the party climbed the gradual ascent of the mountain road, and then they turned off into a valley, heavily wooded with pine. Beyond were vistas of receding blue peaks, growing ever paler and more mystic as they faded into the west.

"Every bit of this country seems more lovely than the last," exclaimed Isabel.

"Don't those distances make your heart leap up," cried Mrs. Houston, "as Wordsworth's did when he saw the rainbow?"

"So be it when I shall grow old
Or let me die!"

Isabel was quoting a poem which she loved.

As they drew near to the mining location, they saw huge dump piles, the buildings which housed the machinery, the neatly painted offices, and long rough boarding houses for the men. Here and there on the hillside were the small homes of the foremen, and others who had families with them.

Mr. Houston and Meta drew up their horses before the door of the office; and a short, gray-haired man came out and shook hands. "Yes, yes, look around and see everything," he was saying cordially, as the buckboard drove up.

After introductions and a few pleasant comments on weather and scene, the manager returned to his office and summoned a lean, tanned person to show the party about. The speech of this man was as limited as possible, but his eyes greedily took in

every detail of dress and manner as the group dismounted from horse or buckboard.

"D'you want to go underground?" he asked, with his gaze fixed on the band of Meta's hat.

"I don't believe the ladies care to," said Mr. Houston dubiously.

"Hardly!" Isabel stepped back in alarm.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Houston looked disturbed.

"I'd just as lief," said Meta, with a cool, detached air; "but of course I've been in mines before."

"The tenderfeet will keep their tender feet on *terra firma*," Isabel protested.

"Very well." Mr. Houston looked rather relieved. "I didn't think you'd really care to go down. It's a gloomy business, and there's not much to see, anyhow; only it makes a good story when you tell about it."

"We'll find some other tale to entertain our friends with," said Mrs. Houston.

The lean man showed them the "cage," which was to take the men down underground; and a chart of the mine, where depths and chambers were indicated. "That serves almost as well as the descent into Avernus," commented Isabel.

"You'll want to see the stamp-mill, anyway," said their escort, minutely examining Mrs. Houston's blue neck-ribbon.

"Oh, yes, of course. I don't know what it is, but I don't really suppose it's where they make stamps."

"It's where they stamp the ore into powder, so that the silver can be washed out," Mr. Houston

explained. "You'd better say all you can think of, before you go inside, for there won't be much chance when you're there."

As they went into the building, the noise of heavy pounding became apparent. When they had entered the inner room and the doors had been shut, the din became terrific. Heavy steel rods worked up and down incessantly, crushing the bits of ore into powder; and a constant stream of water swept beneath the rods, carrying away the mud through channels where it was gradually sifted till nothing but the ore was left. The noise was more than deafening. It was so overwhelming that one was scarcely conscious of it as *noise*, but more as some power which paralyzed one's speech and hearing. If a bystander put his lips to another person's ear and shouted, the resulting vibration was like a whisper.

After one attempt to say something to Meta, Isabel stood with her hands over her ears, gazing at the relentless motion of the rods. It was not long till all of the party were ready to make a dash to the outer air. When they had receded from the building, and relaxed from the strain of the uproar in which they had been immersed, they drew long sighs of relief.

"How any human being can stay in a place like that is beyond me," said Meta. "It seems wicked to ask anybody to."

"Perhaps they get used to it," returned Isabel vaguely. She was still dazed and palpitating. Then, as her eyes wandered over the immediate scene, she gave a shriek, and clutched at the nearest

sleeve, which happened to be that of the lean foreman. "Oh, what's that?" she cried. A shaggy creature was nosing at a dump not far away.

"Nothing but a bear," answered the foreman, enjoying the horrified looks of the ladies.

"Oh, dear!" Isabel quavered. "Why is he here? Let's run. I can't bear to see another bear." She began laughing hysterically at her unintended pun.

Mrs. Houston was holding to her husband's arm. "Is it a pet?" asked Mr. Houston calmly.

"Well, I don't know as you'd call him that," drawled the foreman. "Most of these camps have visiting bears — not exactly the lap-dog kind, you know; but they hang around and eat up the garbage. They're not fierce, but we don't stir 'em up any more than we can help. This one's been here ever since he was a cub. His name used to be Fritz, but now it's Jof-fer," he announced in conclusion.

The bear turned and came toward the group, but stopped and sniffed at the ground. Isabel shrank and cried out as he came near. He passed with an indifferent glance at the interlopers. There was a bald spot on the side of his head, near the ear.

"Oh!" Mrs. Houston and Isabel gave a united cry of recognition.

"What is it?" asked Meta.

"He's bald, see! It's the same bear we saw in the gulch yesterday, that frightened us so terribly."

The foreman laughed when he heard the story. "Somebody threw some hot water on him once, by mistake. That's why his head looks so queer. Yes, he wanders down the valley, and goes into that

canyon. He has a nest in a cave there, where he sleeps in winter. He wouldn't really have done you any harm. He just wanted to know who you were."

"We should have had calling cards with us," Isabel remarked.

"He may be all right, but I should be just as terrified again, if I should meet him," said Mrs. Houston nervously.

"I, too, I don't like bears. I hate 'em," cried Isabel in an irritated tone.

"Oh, now, bears aren't bad. They're quite pleasant animals, in fact," parried the foreman. "Though I must say, I do tell my children to keep strictly away from Jof-fer."

"I hope he will stay away from our camp," said Mr. Houston, frowning. "He makes our ladies nervous."

"He won't go that far down the valley," the foreman reassured them. "He never goes beyond his own canyon."

"I don't see what they have the brute around for," Mr. Houston muttered. "They'd do better to put him out of the way."

"I think so, too," Isabel echoed.

Joffre was now out of sight behind the slag-piles. The party went on, and inspected the assay-office, where the ore was examined and recorded; the company store; the cook-shack, where a white-clad Chinaman was putting potatoes on to boil in a huge caldron; and the long rude dining-room, with its rough board tables and benches.

"You'll stay and have dinner," said the foreman, whose name was Mr. Hurd. "The cook'll fix you

up a corner in the dining-room, and there's always a lot to eat, such as it is."

"Thank you, we'd be delighted," said Mr. Houston, looking at his watch. "It would be pretty late for lunch if we started home now."

The foreman left them, and they went out and sat in the shade of the office, where they could look off across the narrow valley to the green forests and rough granite cliffs. While they were sitting there, two children, a boy and a girl, about seven and nine years old, came shyly toward them from one of the houses on the hillside.

Mrs. Houston beckoned to them cordially. "Come on," she called. "Do come and see us a minute." Her happy face showed her love for children.

The two youngsters sidled up hesitatingly. "Do you live here?" asked Mrs. Houston, taking the little girl by the hand.

"Yes. That was my papa that you were with," the child replied. "My name's Rose Hurd, and his is Freddy Hurd." She indicated her younger brother, who was already succumbing to Isabel's wiles.

"Do you go to school?" Mrs. Houston inquired.

Rose shook her head. "There isn't any school here. Mother teaches us a little, but there's the baby, and she doesn't have much time."

"I'd like to teach you," said Mrs. Houston eagerly, giving the child a hug. "Can't you come down to our camp sometimes?"

"I don't know," Rose answered. "We'd like to, awfully. Do you live far away?"

"It's quite a little way down the valley, but your father can bring you down some day, I'm sure. We just love children."

"Have you got a house?" questioned Freddy, looking from one to another. "Do you all live in a big house?"

"We have three little houses and a tent," Isabel explained. "So there will be a lot to look at. We'll show you everything if you'll come."

"We'll make papa bring us," said Rose decisively. She was a thin, freckled miss, with her hair combed tightly back and braided into two slim pig-tails.

"I've been down to Martaville," boasted the rud-dier Freddy. "I went down with papa; and a lady down there had a white dog with black spots on it. And there was a post-office there, and they put all the letters into glass boxes, and you could look in and see 'em." His eyes were big with the interest of his adventure.

"Truly marvelous!" Isabel caught the little fellow to her. "We'll try to find something just as wonderful when you come to see us. We keep our butter in the spring. Maybe you'd like to see that."

Before the children ran off for their dinner, they had established a firm friendship with the visitors, and had promised to induce their father to bring them down to the lower camp.

At the signal for dinner in the big dining-room, the Houstons and Isabel joined the horde of hungry men hastening across the mining location. The men stared to see the three women enter the dining-room and take places which the cook pointed out to them at a table covered with white oilcloth. A

hearty meal was set before them, of meat and potatoes and rice pudding.

"We're grateful for this hospitality," Mrs. Houston remarked. "Imagine the wails of starvation in the crowd, if we had had to wait till we got home, for something to eat. Did you think we'd have lunch up here, Gilbert?"

"Well, no. I thought we'd get back in time. I didn't realize that the forenoon would slip away so fast," Mr. Houston confessed. "But here in the West people expect to be offered a meal wherever they are. Everybody accepts that sort of thing as a matter of course. You ought to see how it is out on the ranches. Every one keeps open house, and no one hesitates to ride up to anybody else's door at meal time."

"That's the true community spirit, isn't it?" said Isabel. "I do wish I could see a ranch."

"You must, before you leave this country," said Meta. "Perhaps we can work it out in some way. But you don't want to tear yourself away from the mountains quite yet, do you?"

"Not at this stage," Isabel smiled, "when I'm just beginning to understand how glorious they are."

After dinner, they made a short call on Mrs. Hurd and the baby, and then stopped at the office of the manager to thank him for the pleasures of their visit. It was after one o'clock when Mr. Sammis brought out the buckboard, and the party started for their own domain. The downward trip was easier and shorter than the somewhat toilsome journey of the morning.

They all gave a whoop of joy when they saw

their own little village come into sight down the valley. "It begins to seem like home, doesn't it?" said Mrs. Houston. "But how small and cuddled-up the cabins look there in the sun."

"It's surprising how quickly one curls himself up in a shell and calls it home," said Isabel. "Isn't it Fannie Hurst who tells about a woman who was so domestic that 'with a yard of cretonne and a photograph of her sister's children in Kansas City, she could make a hotel bedroom look like the boudoir of a movie queen'?"

Mrs. Houston laughed merrily. "That would be the true test of a home-maker," she replied.

"Anyhow, it's nice to get back to the camp," Isabel sighed, "though the expedition was beautiful. And just think! We found some children. If it hadn't been for 'Jof-fer' everything would have been perfect. You don't imagine he'll ever really prowl down into our back yard, do you?"

"Oh, no, I don't believe so," her companion answered. "They say he sticks to his own stamping-ground."

"Let us hope and pray that he will," breathed the girl. "I think bears are superfluous beasts. I don't see why they were ever created."

"Perhaps they weren't intended to be fierce when they were created," hazarded Mrs. Houston.

The two tenderfeet alighted at the cabins, but Meta and her father rode their horses farther down to the improvised stable near the work-shacks.

Isabel went into the Ritz to take off her hat and adjust her hair; then she sat down to re-read her letters, and to write a letter home. Mrs. Houston

got out one of her thick educational books, which she had promised herself to read. Mr. Houston busied himself with putting some solid hooks for a hammock, so that it could swing between two of the cabins. The afternoon hastened on.

When Isabel came out of the cabin at half-past four, she found Meta reading in the hammock.

"Have you written a three-volume novel?" asked Meta, lowering her book.

"Not quite; only letters to mother and Fanny — long rambling ones — and one or two others. I slept for fifteen minutes, too," she added guiltily. "I never expected to nap in the afternoon till I was seventy-five, and weighed two hundred pounds. We never know how we'll degenerate."

"I don't call that degenerating; but I can't sleep in the daytime," said Meta.

"I wish I couldn't," Isabel complained. "But what are you reading? Have you begun your stage-books already?"

"I couldn't resist them," Meta replied. "It's fascinating stuff. I wonder why people are so commonplace now? In those days they seemed to have such a — flavor."

"They were more natural, perhaps." Isabel leaned against the heavy ropes of the hammock. "At least they didn't suppress their emotions so much."

"I should say they didn't. I was just reading about Mrs. Siddons, the actress, and her two daughters. They had a romantic affair with Sir Thomas Lawrence, it seems."

"Sir Thomas Lawrence, the artist? I remem-

ber, he painted a beautiful portrait of Mrs. Siddons. I saw it in the National Gallery. But I don't know that I ever heard of her daughters. Tell me about them." Isabel was always keen for a romance.

"She had two, as I said,—Sarah and Maria. Well, Tom Lawrence — he wasn't a *Sir* then — used to come to the house, and he fell in love with Sarah, and they were engaged. After a while, he began to act gloomy and moody, and Maria began to peak and pine. Then it came out that Lawrence was in love with Maria, and not Sarah, and he couldn't live a minute without her."

"How did Mrs. Siddons receive that news?" Isabel inquired.

"She felt dreadfully on Sarah's account. But Lawrence broke off with Sarah, and was engaged to Maria. Things went on for a while, Maria getting healthier and happier, and Sarah drooping with a broken heart. And then what do you suppose the fickle man did?" Meta sat up straight in her excitement.

"I'm sure I don't know."

"He decided that it wasn't Maria that he loved at all, but Sarah. And so he threw Maria over, to the horror of all concerned, and wanted to be engaged to Sarah again. But Maria began to go into a 'decline,' and she actually died, and on her death-bed made Sarah promise that she wouldn't marry Thomas!"

"No! Not really?" Isabel was all agog over this tale of the past.

"Yes, truly. And Sarah lived on for a while,

and *she* died, and Thomas Lawrence never married anybody."

"I should think nobody would want him," exclaimed Isabel indignantly.

"Well, he grew famous and rich, and he was handsome to begin with. I dare say somebody would have accepted him. But it's a queer story, isn't it?"

"It surely is. I wonder whether he ever found out which one he did care for?"

Isabel was pensive as she leaned against the hammock.

"If he did, he never told." Meta sank to a more comfortable position. "And oh, did you know that Charles Lamb wanted to marry the actress, Fanny Kelly?"

"Why, no, I don't believe I ever heard of it. I supposed he loved to live with his sister, and didn't care for any one else."

"He wrote a letter to Fanny Kelly," said Meta, talking fast,— "it's here in one of these books — asking her to marry him. And she wouldn't because she said she liked some one else better."

"Well, I don't think," said Isabel quickly, "that they ought to publish things like that. It seems terrible to have it all down in print on a page where any one can look at it. Just think how sensitive he was, and how horrified and humiliated he would be to have his most sacred feelings bandied about like that!"

"It does seem rather awful." Meta closed her book thoughtfully and lay looking at the sky. "I

didn't think of that. It just seemed interesting to me."

"I think it's outrageous." Isabel was flushed with indignation. "How would we like to have things of that sort published about us?"

"If we were dead, I don't suppose we'd care very much," meditated Meta.

"It doesn't matter whether we're dead or not. We have a right to our individuality and our privacy just the same," Isabel protested.

"M-maybe. But somehow I have the feeling that if we make ourselves famous, we forfeit the right to at least a certain amount of privacy. We demand the attention and praise of the public; and we can't expect the public to stop at just the point we'd like it to. If we ask it — or *them*, whichever it is — to gaze upon our work and approve it and pay for it, we can't blame them if they fasten their glare on us."

"I don't agree with you," said Isabel. "We have a right to expect the public to have more common sense."

"That's asking rather too much," Meta returned.

"When you get to be a 'stage favorite,' then, you'll expect to have your love letters published, and think nothing of it," responded Isabel hotly.

Meta colored. "Probably I shan't have any. I don't know that I'd expect just that if I did have them; but I do think that when you perform in public or write books or plays for the public, you lay yourself open to curiosity and criticism, and you're an unreasonable prig if you aren't willing to stand the consequences. I know it would just about kill me

to be hauled over the coals by the dramatic critics; but if I ever got to where I counted for enough to be noticed, I'd have to take what came and not squirm."

"Oh, dear, I suppose that's true," admitted Isabel. "It doesn't seem as if any critic could be so mean as to say scathing things about you, Meta; but if they did, you wouldn't go down under it. I think being a critic is about the most undesirable job in the world, anyhow. Father says that most of the critics are people who can't do things themselves. They live by making comments on people who are cleverer than they are."

"That's just about it," Meta nodded wisely. "They may have their reason for existence; but I honestly think it's worth more to *do* things, even if they aren't perfect, than to sit in a little office and score those who are trying to accomplish something; or even praise them condescendingly."

"So do I. But I certainly am glad that the papers don't publish criticisms of jewelry work. I'd hate to have to read something like this: 'The pendant made last week by Miss Isabel Carleton lacks distinction. It has no originality and was evidently copied from something she saw at Tiffany's. Her style in pendants is weak; her designs are sensational and trite. We can't imagine why she thinks she can make jewelry. She ought to be washing windows or weeding onions.'"

Meta laughed. "You should be thankful that you don't have to stand things like that. Even from my small experience, I know how trying criticism is, and how one dreads what people are saying."

"I don't believe you'll ever have very harrowing

attacks on your work," said Isabel. She leaned over and gave Meta a kiss on the cheek. "There, now! Go on with your reading, Lady Clara Vere de Vere, and I'll see what we're going to have for supper. I think I hear goings-on in Delmonico's."

It was Isabel's turn to get the dinner. She went into the cook-cabin, and found Mrs. Houston deftly concocting a blanc mange, "to be eaten with strawberry jam," as she explained.

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that," remonstrated Isabel. "It's my turn to get supper, you know."

"Yes," said Mrs. Houston, "but you were busy, and I saw that this milk ought to be used."

"It's awfully good of you. You can do almost anything, can't you?" Isabel spoke admiringly.

"Dear me, hardly," Mrs. Houston answered. "My mother taught me to cook and keep house, for she said it made life so much easier for everybody if a woman knew how those things should be done."

"I'm glad I've had domestic science," said Isabel, getting some potatoes out of a bag. "I don't know what I'd do without it. I can't do a lot of things, but I've learned a few. Mother and Fanny and I have to get the dinner once a week, you know, when the maid is out; and sometimes I've prepared the dinner all alone. So I'm not afraid of a kettle or a frying pan."

"I wish Meta had taken some instruction in cooking and sewing. She seems so helpless about those things."

"Well, a girl with high spirits, like Meta, doesn't enjoy such things very much. They're too tame."

Isabel was washing the potatoes in a tin pan. "And she hasn't had much chance, either, moving around as she has."

"I mean that she shall learn, even though it isn't very congenial to her," said the step-mother decisively. "She'll find it a convenience in her later life."

Isabel was paring the potatoes with firm rapid motions. "I think I told you what I was going to have for supper," she said; "mashed potatoes, and those chops that Mr. Sammis brought this morning, with gravy. I don't mean that he brought 'em with gravy —"

Presently Mrs. Houston went away; and Isabel, with extra care, because she wanted everything just right, finished the cooking and set the table. Very calmly, to show that she wasn't flustered, she mashed the potatoes, and fried the chops. She finished at the time the "boys" came home, and she made the gravy while they washed their hands and faces.

The meal was eminently successful. "We certainly have a few little chefs with us," began George, as the plates were being changed for the dessert.

"No bouquets," warned Mrs. Houston. "We can't be setting up a culinary rivalry here. You don't mind, do you, Isabel?"

"I should say not," Isabel returned hastily.

"Quite right," commented Mr. Houston.

Isabel thought of Meta's inexperience, and the intention of saving her any annoying comparisons. She launched into an account of the Big Indian trip, and the revelations about Joffre, and there was plenty of harmless talk until the meal was over.

After supper, Mr. Houston wiped the dishes for Isabel, and entertained her with one of his experiences in a mining town in Alaska.

Thoroughly wearied with her endeavors, she joined the three other young people on the "Plaza" in front of the cabins. There was still a half-hour before dark, and she meant to watch the changing lights on the mountains as the twilight faded. But Rodney and George had lapsed from serious men-of-business to hilarious lads at play.

"Hi, Isabel," called Rodney, "come on now. You've got to learn to ride. The idea of your being dragged up to the Big Indian in a buckboard. That's a scandal in Montana society."

"Oh, dear, I don't want to learn now." Isabel looked dismayed. She had been secretly dreading the time when she would have to mount a horse and ride over the perilous mountain paths. "Have I got to?" she quavered.

"Pos-i-tively," said Rodney. "No excuses accepted."

"It doesn't seem as if I could. It's been such a busy day, and I'm so tired."

"Every day will be busy and you'll always be tired," interpolated George.

"Your feelings don't count," said Rodney inexorably. "And haven't I heard of your cavorting around on that pony out at your grandfather's?"

"Shorty, you mean? Oh, I've been on him once or twice, but he's so little, and I always stepped right off the side porch onto his back, while grandfather held him. But a horse is such a *big* thing," Isabel faltered.

"To be sure. The better to cart you around, my dear," said Rodney in a Red-Riding-Hood tone.

George and Meta were listening, much amused. "I'll bring Diana," volunteered George. "She's as steady as a saw-horse — a pretty good sized one."

"You'll feel as if she were twenty feet high, Isabel," said Meta. "You can't ride in that skirt. Go and get your gymnasium rig on."

"I don't want to bother to change," objected Isabel.

"It makes no difference what you want." Meta bundled Isabel into the Ritz, and supervised the change from skirts to bloomers. She dragged Isabel forth by the arm just as George appeared leading Diana, a handsome intelligent black horse, which Mr. Houston had hired in the village of Martaville.

Isabel had reached a stage of passive resignation. "What do I do first?" she queried, standing helplessly on the "Plaza."

"Get up on this boulder," said Rodney, "and I'll bring the horse alongside."

Isabel hopped up on the boulder. Rodney approached, leading Diana. Isabel began to flap her hands. "Oh, don't bring her so close," she begged. The horse's head with its black rolling eyes seemed suddenly appalling.

"She won't hurt you. How do you expect to ride if she doesn't come near you?" asked Rodney scornfully.

"I don't expect to." Isabel was ready to jump down from the rock and retreat ignominiously into

the cabin. Meta restrained her with a firm hold on her blouse.

Rodney brought the horse up to the rock. "There!" he said, "you see she's as gentle as a parlor sofa. Put your foot into the stirrup — Now!"

Isabel raised her foot hesitatingly. There was an outcry of laughter from Meta. "Ha-ha! She's wrong-side-to. You'll face the horse's tail, Isabel. No, no! Turn around, and for goodness' sake, don't squeal so."

Isabel was biting her lips with vexation. "I told you I didn't know anything about it," she said crossly.

"We're helping you because you don't know," answered Rodney. He was grave, though his eyes were twinkling. "Come on. Try again. Put your foot in the stirrup. There, that's right."

The horse stepped forward a trifle, and Isabel was left with one foot in the stirrup, and the other hopping on the rock. She was clinging to the pommel of the saddle, and giving queer little shrieks of anxiety.

Meta went off into convulsions of laughter again. "Oh, Isabel," she groaned, "you're so funny. I can't stand it."

"I think you're unkind to roar like that." Isabel looked over her shoulder with a dangerous light in her eye.

"Oh, come on. Be game. Get on this time," begged Rodney, who dared not give way to his mirth.

There was a jerk — a spring — a gasp. Isabel

was on the horse, and clutching at the horn of the saddle. Her eyes were wild.

"Fine, fine!" cried George encouragingly.

"Oh, Rod, be careful, won't you?" Isabel pleaded. "Don't let go of the bridle."

"No, I won't yet. I'll make her walk up and down as solemn as a dress-parade."

The horse did indeed seem twenty feet high. "I never would have supposed she was such an enormous beast," Isabel thought. "I must look a sight." She timidly put up one hand to smooth her hair.

"Now, let go of the horn of the saddle," admonished Rodney, "and get hold of the reins. No, both hands. I insist. There, that's right. Guide your steed. You know how to do that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course." Isabel made another furtive dab at her hair.

"Now I'm going to let go," Rodney announced suddenly.

"Oh, don't."

"Yes, I shall," said the riding master coolly. He let go of the bridle, and walked back toward the camp.

The horse strode on up the valley, and Isabel sat swaying and quaking, but enjoying her ride rather more than she expected. If it had not been for the eyes of her companions boring into her back, she might have been almost at ease; but the knowledge that three hilarious young people were ready to burst into guffaws at her slightest mistake made her

nervous and awkward. She was in the state of mind in which one does the silliest things, apparently without any power of restraint.

"I think I've gone far enough," she thought, as Diana continued her unrelenting way along the bank. "I suppose I must turn around." She began to pull at the reins and to make incoherent noises to the horse. Just then she felt her hair loosening on her neck, and put up a hand to it. The reins became crossed, and the puzzled horse began to throw her head about. Terrified, Isabel gave a hard tug at the reins. Obediently, but still mystified, the horse obeyed the silent command at the bit, and swerved into the scrub-oaks which bordered the path. "Oh, whoa, whoa!" called Isabel hoarsely, still pulling at the wrong rein. The horse went on into the low straggling oaks, where the rough branches leaned down to catch the unwary. Isabel was nearly swept off her steed, but crouching and shielding herself as best she could, she clung on desperately, still hauling mechanically at the crossed reins, and forcing the horse farther and farther from the road. "Oh, whoa! whoa! whoa!" she kept shouting in anguish, while the boughs tore at her hair and her clothes.

She heard Rodney calling, "Hold on, hold on, Isabel," in a voice nearly as frightened as her own; and she distinguished the hurried words of George and Meta, who appeared to be less alarmed than Rodney.

The horse plunged on, and came at last to a standstill with her nose against the stone wall of the cliff. Isabel felt a kind of vague wonder to note that she herself was still in the saddle, and still in a state

comparatively intact. She had rather supposed she was torn limb from limb. She sat helplessly till Rodney came up, his face showing a mixture of amusement and concern.

"What in the world are you trying to do?" he cried as he approached through the thicket. "You did pretty well to stay on. Are you torn to pieces?"

"Yes, I think I am," said Isabel, still dazed with her rash ride. She regarded her riddled sleeve and a long red scratch on her arm in a confused way, as if they might belong to some one else. "I think I'm in ribbons, Rod." Her voice broke.

"Don't cry. For heaven's sake, don't cry," begged Rodney hurriedly. "Here are Meta and George."

"I — I won't," Isabel whimpered, composing her face as best she could.

Rodney was helping her down when the others came up. "You had the reins crossed!" he said in a tone of suppressed disgust. "I thought you knew better than that."

"Isabel! you didn't!" said Meta, stifling a giggle at Isabel's forlorn expression.

"I preferred 'em that way," retorted Isabel, with spirit.

"Good for you, Isabel. Don't let them badger you," exclaimed George. "But, by ginger, you did get a dig or two. You look as if you'd carried the good news from Ghent to Aix!"

Meta could no longer control herself. She burst into peals of laughter. "Oh, if you could see how you look!" she gasped. "You're too funny for

words. I hope you aren't hurt, for I can't help roaring, even if you are."

"I shan't tell you if I am," Isabel returned, with tears in her eyes. "I don't think it's very nice of you to jeer at me like that — just because you've ridden all your life, and know all about everything."

"I'm sorry —" Meta began, trying to subdue her hilarity.

Isabel glanced at Rodney, and saw him struggling to keep back a grin, while he looked his distress at her touchiness. Her face relaxed, and a slow smile crept over it. "It's all right, Meta," she said, beginning to laugh wryly. "I know I must be an awful sight."

"Your blouse is in shreds," Meta answered, taking stock of Isabel's injuries. "And you have a horrible scratch on your arm, and your hair is down, and your stockings are all to pieces, and your shoe is untied, and your feelings are barbarously lacerated. But you have your eyes, for which fact I'm glad; and apparently your bones aren't broken. Come on home and be consoled, and make yourself look like our own Little Darling once more!"

"I told you I was too tired to ride," Isabel remarked; "and I guess I've proved it."

"You've proved something, but I'm not sure what it is," said Rodney dryly. He took hold of the horse's bridle, to lead the unhappy creature out of the thicket.

"Diana's wondering what it's all about," said George sympathetically, patting the horse on the neck; "she says she never ran across such a queer lady-centaur before."

"I'm sorry for her. She's a nice thing, if I did get her into a mess," sighed Isabel.

The procession started back to the village. The dusk was beginning to fall, and the group felt the witchery of the mountain twilight. They fell silent as they plodded back along the stream.

"Well, you're collecting the thrills all right, aren't you, Isabel?" said Rodney, as they neared the home Plaza.

"That's what I came West for," Isabel responded. "They give one a sort of a jolt while they're happening; but I don't care — I'm ready for a lot more."

CHAPTER VI

BURNED MACARONI

THE next few days passed quietly, with here and there an incident to distinguish one from another.

On Friday, the forenoon was gray, with a sprinkle of rain, and every one kept indoors, reading, writing letters, knitting, or sewing. Isabel had mended a three-cornered tear in her bloomers; the blouse and hose were beyond mending, and had to be thrown away. Mr. Houston kept up the fire on the hearth in the Ritz-Carlton, though the day was not cold. Occasionally some one went to the door of cabin or tent for a glance at the mountains, which looked strange in their wrappings of gray and purple mist.

About noon, the sun came out, and the rain dried away; the clouds melted from the mountains, and the landscape assumed its normal guise.

Isabel and Meta climbed the rocks behind the cabin, and sat for a long time looking across the valley and down the stream, where they could catch a glimpse of the work-camp, over the jutting edge of the cliff. In the midst of her exaltation at the beauty of the view, Isabel was thinking of the prosaic fact that it was Meta's day for preparing the supper. She studiously refrained from revealing her thoughts, however. Meta had a nervous air as they came down to the cabins again.

At the door of Delmonico's, Meta paused. "I suppose I've got to get supper," she burst out. "What on earth am I going to have?" She stood looking like the Tragic Muse, with her eyes fixed on vacancy.

"I thought it was to be shredded wheat biscuit," returned Isabel, trying to be jocular, though she was really disturbed.

"Can't you suggest something?" asked Meta irritably.

"Why don't you have something that you like, yourself?" Isabel ventured.

"There isn't anything that I like at this moment," said Meta with a satirical smile.

"You really should have planned your bill of fare before," Isabel could not help saying. "You know it isn't so easy to get up a meal on short notice as it is if you take plenty of time."

"I couldn't bear to think of it," Meta explained. "It was impossible to concentrate on such a painful subject."

"Well, you'll have to concentrate all the harder now. Why don't you have macaroni and tomatoes? We haven't had that yet."

"How do you do it?" queried Meta grimly.

"You just break up the macaroni into little pieces, and cook it in salted water, and then you have the canned tomato heated, and you put them together, with butter and pepper, of course. It's as easy as pie."

“Just about as easy as pie would be to me,” sighed the unwilling cook. “But we’ll have to have some kind of meat, shan’t we?”

"This isn't the day for Mr. Sammis to bring meat. You'll have to invent something."

"I think it's too bad that I have to get dinner on a meatless day," exclaimed Meta hotly.

Isabel laughed. "You *would* enjoy cooking steak for the crowd!"

Meta shuddered. "I believe I prefer it meatless," she admitted.

Isabel pondered the situation. "There's nice corned beef, canned. You could have that sliced, with mustard; and have two hot dishes,—the macaroni, and baked potatoes. Those are easy. And you might have some hot biscuits."

"Who's going to make biscuits?" glared Meta.

"Oh, I forgot you couldn't," Isabel apologized. "Well, there's bread left, though it isn't very fresh."

"Oh, dear," groaned Meta, "I know I can't get together anything fit to eat. The crowd will starve to death before morning."

"No danger," Isabel answered cheerfully. She went into the sitting-room tent, where Mrs. Houston was carefully knitting a heel into an army sock. "I think I'd better help Meta with her supper," Isabel suggested in a low tone. "It's really an affliction to her to have to get it."

"I'd rather you didn't," Mrs. Houston answered. "You did yours alone, and it's only fair that she should do the same. She needs the experience."

"Oh, but —" Isabel began.

"She'll get on all right," said Mrs. Houston, stopping to count stitches. "She's quick at learning things; and she has imagination,—I always contend that a cook needs that."

"I don't know that it's everything," Isabel answered dubiously.

She went back and stood in the door of the cook-cabin. Meta, in a long apron, was scrubbing the potatoes, her handsome head bent sternly over the pan. She laid the spotless potatoes out on the table, and then lighted the oven of the oil stove. "Isabel," she called querulously, as she stood with the spent match in her hand, "*what* shall I have for dessert?"

"Isn't there something in a can?" asked Isabel vaguely.

"I don't see anything except canned cherries, and there's nothing very filling about them. I'm ashamed to give the family a skimpy dessert, when they're not getting any hot meat. There ought to be something hearty."

"Your oven will be hot for the potatoes: why don't you make a cottage pudding with vanilla sauce? You really haven't much of anything to cook, since the meat is ready, and the potatoes cook themselves."

Meta gave a tragic gesture. "You sound like one of those women's magazines that tell 'How I Entertained the Binkses over Sunday without a Maid.' You could make a fortune if you'd only write as you talk. You ought to employ a stenographer to take down your words of wisdom."

Isabel looked vexed. "Well, you asked me," she replied. "Now you make fun of me because I answer you."

"No, I never made fun of you. I take you with deadly seriousness. What kind of thing was that that you suggested — a log-cabin pudding?"

"No. A cottage pudding. You know — a cake-pudding, some people call it. Put your potatoes into the oven, and I'll tell you how. Here, I'll go and write it down, while you're getting the macaroni ready."

She came back presently with a slip of paper. "It's no harder than candy, and you've made that," she said encouragingly.

"I don't believe that I can do it, any more than I can fly," said Meta, as she took the receipt.

Isabel's heart sank as she saw how awkwardly Meta was doing things, and how the nervous color was rising to her cheeks. She went back to Mrs. Houston. "I'm all worked up about Meta," she said. "I still think I'd better help her."

"Truly, I think it's better to let her do it alone," answered Mrs. Houston. "She needs just that sort of thing. She has allowed herself to believe that she could always get somebody to do what she didn't want to do, herself. Any girl ought to learn how to put a simple meal on the table, and here Meta is almost a grown-up young woman."

"But this is quite an undertaking."

"She should have started earlier, and she would have been all right." The lady had the calmness of one who has dealt with girls for years, and encountered innumerable problems of self-pity and procrastination and high temper.

Isabel went to the Ritz-Carlton and tried to read. She found that the words meant nothing to her, and that her foot was tapping the floor. Now and then she caught the sounds of the struggle in the next cabin.

At last she could stand the strain no longer, and went over to Delmonico's, determined to help at least with the last details of the meal. She found that Mrs. Houston had just entered the kitchen.

"How are you getting on, Meta?" asked the step-mother in a cheery tone which faintly suggested the school-teacher.

Meta was twisting a handkerchief around a burned finger. "Horribly," she snapped. And then she added with an injustice to which she was goaded by the smarting of her injured hand, "You just wanted me to fail, anyway."

"Why, Meta!" Mrs. Houston looked shocked.

Meta went on, her voice trembling. "If you had let her, Isabel would have helped me. I heard you whispering in the tent. You kept her from making it easier for me."

"But, Meta," said the other in a studiously controlled tone, "it wasn't Isabel's place to help you. She did her share yesterday."

"You didn't care so much about that. And you helped her, too. Wasn't it you who made the pudding?"

"I'd forgotten it," Mrs. Houston confessed. "I did it because I noticed that we had some milk on hand that needed to be used."

"You wouldn't do it for me. You wanted to humiliate me," Meta cried wrathfully.

Mrs. Houston was pale but steady. "You know that isn't true," she said in quiet protest.

Isabel stood miserably behind her, not knowing whether to stay or go. She was vaguely aware of an acrid odor permeating the atmosphere. "Oh,

something's burning," she burst out, when she had recognized the odor.

Mrs. Houston stepped to the stove, and lifted off the saucepan of macaroni and tomatoes. Meta stood transfixed. Mrs. Houston proceeded to empty the contents of the saucepan into another, and to turn down the flame of the stove.

Isabel ran to set the table. It was nearly time for the young men to come home. Mrs. Houston silently made the vanilla dressing for the pudding, and put on the water for the tea. She left Meta to complete the larger preparations for the meal. There were few words exchanged, as the three women went back and forth.

Isabel remembered that there were some radishes and young onions in a pail of spring-water. She hastily washed and cleaned some of them, while Meta mixed the mustard. Meta, with the step of an insulted princess, was putting the food on the table. The corned beef was lumpy and crumbling, from having been cut with too dull a knife. The bread had suffered in the same way; the slices were thin at one edge and thick at the other. "But they will taste just as well," thought Isabel, appearing not to notice. "I do hope to goodness that the other things are all right."

The three men had caught some inkling of the strained situation, and they talked very busily among themselves, with no word for the food set before them. The potatoes proved to be insufficiently baked. The skins were burned from too hot a flame, but the insides were hard and watery. The

macaroni tasted scorched to such a degree that most of it was left on the plates.

The boys ate manfully, with now and then a furtive glance at each other. Meta, her cheeks flaming and her lips fixed in a bitter line, sat without eating or speaking. Rodney told a joke that fell rather flat. George, in the easy genial way which came so naturally with him, created a diversion by telling a little episode of the day.

"One of the men came to me to-day," he said, "and asked me 'what mean, in *ingles*, spee-rit.' He said it over two or three times. At first I didn't understand him, and then I made out that he meant *spirit*, *ghost*. I tried to explain it with the help of another Greaser who knew a little more English, and they jabbered about it and got quite excited. I suppose they have some superstition among themselves that he was referring to, but I couldn't make it out."

"I know a few words of Spanish. Perhaps I could talk with them," ventured Isabel.

"Better not," said Rodney, frowning. "They might get too fresh. We get along all right. I talk to them by working my arms up and down — the pumphandle method of mastering a foreign tongue, I call it."

"Too bad it isn't taught in the colleges," murmured Isabel. "Perhaps they'll take you into the Romance language department at Jefferson."

"It's a romance all right, to see me uttering honeyed phrases with my elbows to a big Greaser with a pick in his hand," Rodney returned.

Meta got up to change the plates and bring the dessert. There was an awkward pause, which Mrs. Houston tried to fill by sprightly talk about nothing in particular.

Isabel noted with horror that the pudding was a hopeless failure. Each person gazed airily beyond his soggy floury cube of a sickly yellow color, deluged with rich thick sauce. Mr. Houston, answering his wife absently, took up his spoon and then laid it down again. He looked distressed as he watched for Meta to come back from the kitchen. But Meta did not come back. She had slipped away to the Ritz, where Isabel found her crying, after the family had left the table.

It seemed a dreadful thing to see Meta break down like that, for Meta never cried, as Isabel frequently did when things went wrong.

"Oh, now, Meta," Isabel said wretchedly, putting her hand on Meta's hair, as the other girl lay with her face down, on the cot, "it isn't worth bothering about at all. Don't be so unhappy about it."

"It — it was an awful dinner," gasped Meta, mopping her eyes.

"It was all right," responded the loyal friend, "and anyhow, it doesn't matter. Quong gives those boys a regular Christmas dinner every day, down there at the camp. They haven't been hurt any."

"But it was so humiliating," Meta whimpered. "What will George think?"

Isabel's lips twitched with amusement in spite of her real concern. "Nonsense," she said briskly. "George doesn't care whether you can cook or not."

"Well, mother might have helped me, or let you

help me," Meta complained. "She knew I had never really done any cooking before."

"But she thought it was time you learned. She didn't realize that it would be so hard for you."

"I shan't forgive her." Meta sat up, rubbing her eyes with her wet handkerchief.

"Oh, now, Meta," Isabel remonstrated, "you've always been sorry when you've been hard and unforgiving."

"No, I haven't. And anyhow, I can't be soft and easy when people are unkind to me."

"Meta, nobody's been unkind to you."

"Yes, they have. Even you came near it."

Isabel drew a long breath of impatience. "George and I are going to wash the dishes," she said. "You lie here and rest. And you ought to have something to eat. You haven't eaten a thing."

"Nothing was fit to eat," answered Meta.

Isabel left her and went out to where the table still stood in front of the cook-kitchen. Mr. Houston and the younger men were standing about, talking of the War in Europe; they appeared oblivious of all less important things.

Meta had forgotten to put on the dish-water, and Isabel now hastened to put some on the stove in a large kettle. While she was clearing off the table, George left the others and came to help her.

"What's the matter with Meta?" he asked casually, as he set a pile of plates on the kitchen table. "Isn't she coming out to join her friends?"

Isabel was getting soap and towels ready for the process of washing the dishes. "She feels a little upset because she thinks her dinner wasn't all that

she wanted it to be," Isabel replied. "It was her turn to get the dinner or supper, whichever it is that we have, and you know she isn't used to cooking."

"It was all right," said George soberly. "We aren't fussy out here, and supposing she did have some trouble, she shouldn't get excited over it." His usually bright face was downcast.

"She'll get over it in a little while," said Isabel.

"Can't Mrs. Houston soothe her ruffled feelings?" asked George. "She's so calm and poised and so fond of Meta, I should think she could fix things up in fine shape."

Isabel began to dip the water out of the kettle. "We-ell," she said slowly, "the fact is, Meta is just a little — er, vexed, I think you'd call it, at Mrs. Houston."

"Hum,—mad at her step-mother is she?" said George. He went to the basin in the corner to wash his hands before wiping the dishes.

Isabel started at the bluntness of the words. "I wish you wouldn't put it like that," she said.

"It doesn't hurt to say things 'right out,'" George answered. "It's been a trifle hard for Meta to adjust herself to the new conditions, and she's unnecessarily sensitive, anyhow. And I'm sure Mrs. Houston is not to blame for Meta's being edgewise at her. She wants so much to have things harmonious and happy."

"Meta knows that, too," Isabel answered, deftly washing the dishes while George dried them rather awkwardly. "And she'll see the uselessness of this mixup when she comes to herself. But it is trying to the rest of us. Mrs. Houston takes it as coolly

as can be. I don't see why she isn't more worked up over it, though of course I'm glad she isn't."

"She has sense enough to know that it's best to let things blow over, and not have a lot of talk about them. She realizes that it's only a tempest in a teapot."

"Yes, and I suppose we shouldn't talk about it, either," said Isabel slowly. "It seems rather disloyal to be dissecting people behind their backs, if you'll forgive my muddled way of putting it."

"Right-o," George replied, wiping a cup with careful hands.

They found plenty of other things to talk of while their task engaged them. When they went out into the air again, the evening had fallen, crisp and cool. The dusk seemed to Isabel more delicious than ever; except for the discomfort of the *contretemps* with Meta, the night would have been perfect. She and Rodney walked up and down on the bank of the stream, while the glint of the sunset grew sparser on the water, and the blue dusk settled more deeply into the valley.

"You're getting along finely with the weir, aren't you, Rod?" asked Isabel.

"Why, yes, I think we are," Rodney rejoined. "We're getting on so well that I think we'll finish before the time allotted to us."

"That's good. I noticed to-day how the work was progressing — at least to my unpracticed eye."

"Yes, I confess it seems to be all right. I can't think of anything that could happen to spoil it." Rodney spoke as if he were afraid of being too sanguine.

"Nothing could, of course," said Isabel. "You've planned it all carefully, and covered every point, haven't you?"

"We think we have. I don't believe anything has escaped us. We're tremendously anxious to do well in this. George thinks it might mean something permanent for him; even if he should go to France, there might be an opening for him when he came back. And of course I want to make good, too. I'd like to have some recommendations when I get out of college, or a place to look to."

"Well, surely you don't need to worry," said Isabel, with an aggressive cheerfulness.

Rodney was strolling thoughtfully along with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "I don't think so," he replied. "The workmen are pretty tractable now. George and I didn't say anything about it, but at first we had a little trouble with them. They had a kind of suspicion that we were so young we didn't know what we were doing, but that idea's out of their heads now, I guess. I'm glad of that, for they're such fiery galoots that I'd hate to have them get stirred up about anything."

"What would they get stirred up about?" Isabel laughed.

"Nothing that I know of," admitted Rodney. "The fact is, I'm quite elated. It all seems to be turning out splendidly."

"And we're all enjoying this free and easy outdoor life so much."

"Camp life does one thing or the other for you," Rodney said as they paced quietly along. "It narrows your mind down to details so that you degener-

ate into petty personal comment, or else it broadens your outlook to a larger view of things in general. Do you remember the day out at your grandfather's, when we sat on the bridge down in the meadow, and talked, and wondered how it would be to spend a summer in the mountains? "

"And now we begin to know how delightful it is," Isabel answered. "But there are problems in every place you get into, aren't there? "

"That's because you can't run away from yourself. In fact, everybody is his own problem, I suppose."

"I feel somewhat guilty," Isabel meditated, as they turned in the path to walk back, "because things are made so easy for me."

"Well, women should have things made easy for them," said Rodney.

"No, they shouldn't. That's an old-fashioned idea."

"I've heard you say that before."

"I'll keep on saying it till you change your mind. Women ought to take their right places in the world, and not necessarily the easy places. There have been enough of the pussy-cat women, cuddling into the comfortable places, and keeping their paws white and their fur smooth." Rodney gave an appreciative chuckle. "The men shouldn't face all the struggles and then let the women share the successes and rewards," Isabel concluded, warm with her subject.

"Who says so? " queried Rodney in a tone which suggested the tease.

"All nice, intelligent women — mother, and

Cousin Eunice, and Mrs. Houston, and oh, plenty of others."

"I have a good deal of respect for those ladies' opinions," conceded the young man, "but —"

"The time will come when all women, married or single, will be self-supporting; it will be a matter of principle and pride with them." Isabel was echoing Mrs. Houston's sentiments in a tone more militant than the older lady had assumed.

"I was just wondering about the married ones," said Rodney meekly.

"Women aren't so eager to marry as they used to be. They don't want to marry just to have a home and be supported. They can have their own homes and support themselves."

"Whew! I see I'm an old foggy, at my early age," the man responded with an exaggeration of bewilderment.

"You'd better look out, or you will be. This is woman's hour." Isabel's voice bubbled into laughter.

Rodney laughed, too, and changed the subject by reminding Isabel of her "ride from Ghent to Aix."

"I guess it was *aches* all right," he said. "You haven't felt any ill effects, have you?"

"Not in the least, except to my vanity; that ached a little. I know I was a silly spectacle," Isabel rejoined.

"I shouldn't bother about that. Say, it's getting chilly, isn't it?"

They now arrived at the "village," and found George getting together some materials for a fire — bits of packing-boxes, brush, and a good-sized pine

knot or two from the pile which had been left when the work of cleaning up about the cabins had been completed.

"Hooray for George!" cried Rodney. "Just what we were wishing for."

"I'm like an icicle," said Isabel, though she had put on her green sweater before she started.

A thin blade of flame shot up through the dusk. The fire began to glow and crackle. "Come on and toast yourselves," invited George. He brought out cushions and steamer rugs. Isabel went into the Ritz, and discovered Meta sitting at the little window in the dark. After a show of reluctance, Meta consented to come out to the fire, for she was really cold and bored. Nobody said anything as the two girls joined the group. Mr. and Mrs. Houston came from the tent where they had been playing cribbage, and sat with the others before the blaze.

After a while, Mrs. Houston disappeared; a light twinkled in the cook-cabin. And then she appeared again with a big pitcher of hot chocolate and a pile of tin cups.

"Hurrah for the life-saver!" She was greeted with a cheer.

"If somebody will get the sandwiches, we'll have a picnic around the fire," she said briskly.

George ran for the plates of sandwiches,— "Three kinds: sardine, and meat, and cheese," he announced. "And there's something to 'em, believe me. They're not the little afternoon tea kind that you get at the University receptions."

Mr. Houston brought a dish of cookies and ginger snaps from the packages on the shelf. The inade-

quate dinner was supplemented in a way which could not hurt even Meta's feelings, and the sound of laughter and banter echoed through the incessant chatter and scolding of the stream.

On Saturday, Meta was still sulking. She spoke but little during the forenoon, as they all went about their tasks. When she had finished tidying the Ritz, she went out into the ravine behind the camp, to practice her voice exercises, and was gone a long time. When she came back, she sat in the sun reading her books on the history of the stage, and had no word for any one.

Before noon, Mr. Sammis arrived with supplies and the mail; and a mysterious parcel, long and clumsy, with slender sticks protruding from it. "What's that, Gilbert?" asked Mrs. Houston, perplexedly.

"A surprise," replied her husband. "Something to amuse the children."

"I can guess what it is," said Isabel. "Flags."

"No, we have some of those stowed away in the Waldorf," Mr. Houston answered. "Guess again. The Fourth is coming, you know."

"Oh, fireworks!"

"You said it. I can't surprise these smart youngsters, no matter how much I try."

"You do think of the nicest things," said Mrs. Houston, "even though we do tease you about your army-trucks of stuff. I was wondering how we were going to celebrate."

Meta stood looking on without saying anything.

Ordinarily, she would have had a gay word for her father, whom she devotedly loved. She watched while he put the fireworks away in the tent, where they would be kept dry.

Mrs. Houston proceeded with the lunch, which she was preparing, and Meta came silently to set the table. Isabel was making a salad in Delmonico's. All at once, Mrs. Houston put down the plate which she was piling with bread, and turned to her step-daughter. She slipped her arm around the girl's waist. "Meta, dear," she said gently, "I love you, you know." Meta stood looking down, while a flush mounted to her cheeks. She appeared as stony and unyielding as ever. "I wouldn't willingly do anything unkind to you," the step-mother went on. "You know that, don't you?"

"Y-yes, I suppose so," murmured Meta, unwilling to give up her grievance.

"I thought we understood each other," Mrs. Houston continued. "I supposed that we had settled everything that night at Jefferson, the night of the play."

Meta still looked proud and hard. "I thought so, too," she said; "but one never knows what will come up."

"Nothing ought to come up that will separate us, dear. I'm sorry for my thoughtlessness. I didn't realize how hard you might find it to get a simple supper for us."

"It seems easy to you," Meta answered. "But I've never done a thing of that sort; and it did seem as if you were more unkind than you needed to be."

"I suppose I was." Mrs. Houston spoke humbly. "But I was doing what I thought was the best thing."

Meta began to soften. "I — I'm sorry I was so silly," she stammered.

"I'll help you, the next time," said Mrs. Houston.

"You needn't," the girl responded quickly. "I see that I ought to do my share, without depending on any one else. It's a shame for me to let my temper get away with me."

"It's a little hard on the rest of us," smiled the other.

"I'm glad you didn't know me a year or two ago," said Meta, beginning to smile, herself. "I'm a lamb now, compared to what I was then. When I have a childish fit of temper like this, I get so discouraged. It seems as if I should never get tamed down, and be like other people — calm and amiable, like you and Isabel."

Isabel broke in with a laugh. "You ought to see me in a tantrum," she cried; "but then, I'm sure you have. Why, it's only a little while since I had that awful feud with Fanny, and I had thought that I was such a grown-up young lady that I'd never get mad at anybody again."

"Even some of us still-more-grown-up people have our outbursts of temper," Mrs. Houston remarked, going back to the bread. "And I love your spirits, Meta, and your vivacity, and your — what shall I say? — your absolute integrity."

"You sound like a letter of recommendation," laughed Meta. "The thing that ails me is a hard case of temperament."

"Don't let your temperament, so-called, run away with you."

"I shan't. I'll put a ball and chain on it."

"Nothing so restraining. A good strong pull now and then is all it needs."

"It will get it. You'll see."

"I'm sure I shall see something good," Mrs. Houston responded. "I suppose your father is starving while we stand here and talk." In a few moments, a relieved and happy group of people sat down at the out-of-door table.

The two young men had their lunch at the work-camp, as usual. They were taking a part of a half-holiday on this Saturday afternoon, but stayed at the work-camp to oversee the careful disposal of tools and materials. They strolled up to the village between two and three o'clock.

"We're going to work on the bridge this afternoon," called George, as the girls came to the door of the Ritz-Carlton. The men stood with their sleeves rolled up, ready to go to work.

"Aren't you tired? Can't you take a vacation?" asked Meta.

"No, madam, we are not tired," answered George. "What do you think we are — molly-coddles?"

"Hardly, with such arms," commented Isabel.

*"The muscles of our brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands,"*

misquoted Rodney. "We're going to show you how the quickness of the hand deceives the eye.

We'll have a bridge across the foaming torrent before you know what's happened."

"What are you going to do it with?" inquired Meta in a skeptical tone.

"Oh, stones, and logs, and planks," said George. "And by the way, Rod, we should have brought a cant-hook."

"In the bright lexicon of youth there is no such word as *can't-hook*," said Rodney solemnly.

"Well, a *can-hook*, then. By any other name it would yank as hard."

"I'll get one," yielded Rodney; "and a crow-bar; and our rubber boots."

The work on the bridge began with the rolling of several bowlders into place. The young men, in rubber boots, waded into the shallow stream, while the girls sat on the bank, and looked on, chatting foolishness, as young people will.

"Let's make some 'I thought I saw' verses," suggested Isabel. "I haven't made any for ages."

"You begin," said Meta, who was not much of a versifier.

"M-m, let me see," meditated Isabel. "Te-tum, te-tum, te-tum, te-tum:

"I thought I saw across the stream
A barrel full of frogs;
I looked again, and lo! it was
A noble bridge of logs.
'Hang on with all your toes,' said I.
'You'll fall and wet your togs.'"

"Not bad." There was laughter from the volunteer workmen.

"I think that's about as silly as anything could be," said Isabel. "Now, George, it's your turn."

George was red in the face from his exertions, and his thick auburn hair was blown in the wind. He stood leaning on his crow-bar. "I wonder if I could make one," he muttered. "Why can't I think of something?" He mumbled to himself a bit, and then came out with:

"I thought I saw upon the bank
Two large and priceless pearls.
I looked again, and lo! it was
A pair of college girls.
'You'd best avoid the creek,' said I.
'Twill straighten all your curls.'"

The young women giggled appreciatively, though neither of them was given to ringlets.

"I have one," announced Rodney, who had been half audibly struggling with his rhymes. He had a malicious twinkle in his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Meta innocently.

"I thought I saw within our hut
A water-spout of suds;
I looked again, and lo! it was
Our Meta cooking spuds.
'You'd best put on your coat,' said I.
'You'll ruin all your duds.'"

Meta looked annoyed at this reference to her culinary defeat. "I baked the potatoes; I didn't boil them," she retorted, flushing. "And I burned the macaroni. Nothing boiled over."

"Except your temper, eh?" Rodney pretended

to be busy with a stone. "That was almost a geyser, wasn't it?"

Meta grew redder. "I think your verses are horrid," she cried. "I never heard such coarse language."

"This wild life has made us barbaric," responded Rodney cheerfully. "See here, George. This is steady enough for a one-plank foot-bridge, isn't it? Let's fix one up temporarily, so that our refined lady friends can trip across it."

They laid the planks upon the boulders, and steadied them with small posts driven into the sand. A crude bridge spanned the current and touched the hitherto inaccessible shore.

"The tribes will now enter the Promised Land," called Rodney. "Come on, tribes. You first, Meta."

Meta cautiously made her way across the narrow board, swaying and gasping, but keeping a steady footing. She bounded into the grass of the meadow, with a relieved "Ah-h-h!"

"Come on, Isabel," said Rodney. "You aren't afraid, are you?"

"Far from it." Isabel stood ready to start. "It takes more than that to phase me."

"Don't get the reins crossed," admonished George. "Remember the ride from Ghent to Aix."

"It's mean to remind me of that now," pouted Isabel. She started across at a leisurely pace. Halfway across she stopped and looked down into the water. "Are there fish in this part of the stream?" she asked, for the sake of saying something as she stood poised on the narrow plank.

"Big ones," answered Rodney quizzically.

At that moment, Isabel's foot slipped, and the plank canted at a perilous angle. Waving her arms, clutching the air, over Isabel went with a splash into the creek. She did not fall at full length, but stood up to her knees in the cold swift water.

"Ha, ha! Big ones!" repeated Rodney.

"Gold fish!" exclaimed George. Isabel's bright hair was gleaming in the sun.

They all laughed except Isabel. She stood in the water, half dazed and dripping. "It's all George's fault," she said crossly; "he shouldn't have made so much of my previous misfortunes. George Burnham, I'm awfully angry at you. You *wanted* me to fall in."

"I never did,—honest, cross my heart," protested George in the midst of the chorus of laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Houston came to the door of the tent to see what the uproar was all about. They stood laughing, too, when they saw their young guest's predicament.

"I don't think much of your bridge," Isabel complained. "Nor much of your skill as engineers. Meta and I could have done better ourselves." There was a quiver of real anger in her voice, though she took pains to conceal it.

"We're terribly sorry; really, we are," apologized George. "Don't think you have to stand where you fell, Isabel. Permit me to conduct you to the shore." He put out a strong hand, and helped Isabel to the bank on the side toward the village.

"You aren't mad, are you?" called Meta from her safe place in the meadow.

"No, of course not." Isabel tried to speak with good grace. "But it isn't very pleasant to be dumped into the water." She was laughing, herself, in spite of her vexation.

"And it's an awful disappointment to take a plunge into the midst of Jordan's rolling stream," Meta agreed, "and never get into the Promised Land."

"We'll see that she gets there, if she'll give us another chance," said Rodney.

"Some other day." Isabel, with George's assistance, had slopped to the shore, and now was wringing out her skirts. The merriment of the others rippled up again, and followed her as she toiled up the bank, her woolen skirt still heavy with water. Mrs. Houston consoled her, and made light of the event, so that Isabel was soon herself again.

When she came back to the bank of the stream where the others were still working or conversing, Isabel was dry and amiable once more.

"You won't hear the last of this," predicted Rodney. "It'll be a good story to tell, when we get back to Jefferson."

"You mean, I shan't hear the last of it until I get into some other mess and make a joke of myself," Isabel smiled. "Well, I promise to keep it up as long as I'm here. I might as well furnish amusement for the crowd."

"We have to have something to tease you girls about," said George. "We didn't dare say much about the bear, because you were so scared; and we don't dare make fun of Meta about her cooking, because she gets so mad." He glanced slyly over at

Meta, whose rising color proclaimed that he was right.

"Come, now, let's all be as sweet and affable as dear little lambs," said Rodney, who dreaded feminine peevishness. "The afternoon is almost over, and we've worked hard enough. Let's have a stone-skipping contest, and see who's champion, and then we can shy stones at a bottle, and see who'll win the laurels at that."

"Highly intellectual diversions for a lot of college people," murmured Isabel.

"If anybody here is too intellectual for such diversions, she'll have to prove it by better evidence than we've had," Rodney answered dryly.

"That let's me out," cried Isabel. "I'm game for the stone-skipping contest. Come on, George. We'll be partners, and defeat our hated rivals, two to one."

CHAPTER VII

FIREWORKS

THE next day was the first Sunday at Camp.

The party rose late, on the young men's account, for they had risen early all the week. After breakfast, the six people gathered in the tent for Bible reading, in lieu of church services. Mrs. Houston handed the Bible to George Burnham. He took it with no protest and asked simply, "What shall I read?"

"As you choose," Mrs. Houston replied.

"Then why not the Sermon on the Mount?" asked George.

"Just right," said Mr. Houston heartily.

George knew where to find it. He laid the Bible before him on the table, and read in a clear sonorous voice, his head bent seriously over the volume.

Isabel sat on a couch, where she could look out through the inverted V of the tent door, to the mountains swimming in a bluish mist, fast dissipating as the morning advanced. She listened dreamily, wondering at the same time about the family at home, and vaguely surprised at the melody and dignity of George's reading. The stillness in the tent was emphasized by the gurgle of the rushing creek, and the shouts of the workmen who were amusing themselves in their own way.

"*Be ye therefore perfect,*" George was reading, (How could any one be perfect? Isabel questioned.) "*Consider the lilies of the field.*" (That means the clematis and forget-me-nots, too, thought Isabel.) "*Judge not, that ye be not judged.*" (That was reasonable, of course.) "*Seek and ye shall find.*" How beautiful it was — how sane and satisfying! Isabel resolved to read the Bible more, to read these same passages every day. She remembered that her mother did so. She herself had intended to read the Scriptures each day, but somehow she did not very often succeed. She remembered something about the "cares of this world" that "choke the good seed." And so her thoughts accompanied the reading to the last of the passage: "*For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*"

George closed the book and leaned back in his chair. Isabel saw his eyes seek Meta's with a look still absorbed in what he had read. The group sat silent for a moment, and then one by one they rose and went out. There was very little talk around the camp for the rest of the forenoon. George and Meta took a walk together up the valley road.

After dinner Rodney said to Isabel, "Mrs. Houston suggests that you and I ride up to the Big Indian and ask them to bring the two kids down for the fireworks, to-morrow night. What do you say?"

"Oh, gracious!" Isabel looked disturbed. "I don't know whether I dare to ride that far or not. I've been the clown of the party so much that it's getting on my nerves." She colored at the remembrance of her undignified experiences.

"Oh, don't take yourself so seriously as that," said the young man with a laugh. "You'll make it all right. All you have to do is to sit still and let your horse follow her nose."

"We-ell," said the girl. She was aching to get out into the mountains, and it would be pleasant to go with Rodney and without the rest of the family.

"When you're tired, you can get off and rest," suggested Rodney encouragingly.

"Oh, that would be worse than staying on. I'd never be able to mount again."

"Want to try the trip, eh?" Rodney's voice was persuasive. "You'll get along all right. I won't let anything happen to you."

"M-m-m —" said Isabel in a way that meant, "I'll try."

Rodney brought up the horses from the stable. Isabel was to ride Diana again. After a little chaffing from the crowd, Isabel managed to get into the saddle. Though she was still amazed at her elevation from the ground, and disconcerted at the motion of her steed, she was surprised to see how easily she controlled herself and how soon her fear melted away. After the first few minutes of apprehension, she was almost at ease. The horse moved on with a steady swing; the road was a gradual ascent which the horses took at a swift walk.

"Comfortable and happy?" Rodney asked at the end of the first mile.

"Never more so," Isabel replied.

"Good news," said Rodney in a relieved tone. "I hoped you weren't regretting it."

"Not in the least. I'm glad I came."

"It's great, being here, isn't it?"

"It's queer and beautiful. Isn't it strange how things work out in ways that one never dreams of?"

"Yes. I should think we'd learn after a while not to try to plan, but just let things work," said Rodney with a thoughtful air.

"I don't believe I could ever learn it. My mind is always leaping ahead for something that I want; and when I get it, it isn't the same thing at all, but something entirely different."

"Better, I hope."

"Yes, it usually is."

They rode on for long spaces in silence, and then broke into desultory talk. With Rodney, Isabel never felt that she had to "gabble," just for sake of keeping up a conversation. That was one of the most delightful things about their long friendship.

When they neared the mine, Isabel got into a panic about "Jof-fer," the bear. "The horses would be terrified if he appeared, wouldn't they?" she inquired.

"I don't know." Rodney wrinkled his forehead. "These horses are pretty well trained, and I don't think they'd do anything very shocking."

"I'm scared, Rod," said Isabel, somewhat ashamed of her weakness. She had visions of her horse dashing wildly into space, and of herself clinging to the mane, or else being thrown among the rocks.

"Keep cool. There's nothing to worry about. I'll take hold of Diana's bridle, if that will console you any," the young man replied.

"It would help a good deal."

No bear appeared, and Isabel breathed more freely as the riders stopped in front of the foreman's house. The two children ran out, shouting in chorus, "Oh, it's Miss Carleton!"

Isabel was willing to be helped off the horse, for she was tired with the swaying and jolting. She caught the youngsters to her, and kissed them. "I'm glad you haven't forgotten me," she cried.

Mrs. Hurd came out with the baby in her arms, and welcomed the pair smilingly. "It seems good to have a caller once in a while," she said. "And the children have done nothing but talk about you and the other ladies ever since that day you were here."

"We've talked about them, too," Isabel returned. "Mrs. Houston and I have wished that we could have them in and teach them and play with them every day."

"I wish you could," the mother answered. "They need it. But it's a long way for them to go."

"Too long, I suppose," said Isabel. "But anyhow, we want them to come down and see the fireworks that we're going to have to-morrow evening. Were you planning anything of that sort for them?"

"Oh, whee! Fireworks!" shouted Freddy. "Oh, we can go, can't we, mother?"

"Oh, mother, do let us go," begged Rose. "We haven't ever seen any except just those few at Auntie's. Do say yes, mother!"

"I guess their papa can take them down and back," said Mrs. Hurd doubtfully. "But do come into the house, and we'll talk about it."

Rodney led the horses aside to tether them, and then followed Isabel into the house.

"I suppose they'll fall asleep," Mrs. Hurd was saying, "but they'd be terribly disappointed if I didn't let them go."

"We'll have the fireworks as early as possible," said Rodney, "but of course they look better when it's fairly dark."

"Oh, mother, you aren't going to say no, are you?" Rose and Freddy were hopping up and down.

"No; I'm not going to say no," said their mother. She had put the baby into the perambulator, where it lay staring and kicking, to the great entertainment of Isabel, who loved babies.

The two callers stayed for half an hour. Isabel had to talk with the children and hold the baby. Mrs. Hurd brought in ginger ale and cookies to refresh the travelers before they started back. Mr. Hurd was away, but would be back in the morning, and would bring the children down to the "village," unless something happened to prevent.

With some effort, Isabel again mounted to Diana's back. Then Rodney vaulted to his saddle, and the return journey was begun, not without a hasty look-out for Jof-fer. Nothing marred the pleasure of the trip, nor the joy of watching the changing lights on the mountains.

"You're a seasoned equestrienne," laughed Rodney, as the riders came to their own domain again.

"I feel as if I had ridden round the world," Isabel responded. "I'm tired enough to go to bed."

"Next time you won't feel the exertion so much.

We'll have some gay little jaunts, as time goes on," said Rodney. He helped Isabel to dismount, and she went triumphantly into the Ritz, to expound to Meta the success of this new attempt to ride Diana.

The Fourth of July was the next day, Monday. Flags were hoisted early from the gables of the cabins, and a large one drooped over the door of the tent. The day was bright and warm, much as the other days had been; and the forenoon was busy with the usual labors at the work-camp and at the village. The Company for whom the young men were working had sent word that the men were to have a half day of leisure, in spite of the awkwardness of a succession of holidays.

Before luncheon Isabel had conferred privately with Meta. George and Rodney were having lunch with "the family," instead of at the mess-shack, and there were some especial dainties which Mrs. Houston had prepared.

As soon as lunch was finished, Isabel announced, "Meta's going to give the Gettysburg speech to remind us what day it is."

Meta rose and stood in the open space beyond the table. In a rich, sympathetic voice she began, "Four-score and seven years ago,— " and went on to the end of that brief and vital statement of the principles of democracy.

They all sat still for a moment, after Meta had ended with "shall not perish from the earth."

"Magnificent, isn't it?" said George. "It always comes as a sort of surprise every time one hears it."

"We need a Lincoln now," commented Rodney.

"He was the greatest man that ever lived," said Mr. Houston solemnly. "No wonder we don't see him repeated."

Isabel had had a tightening of the throat at the simple grandeur of the words and of the man who wrote them. "I don't think we half appreciate our country," she cried chokingly. "We aren't grateful enough for the right to live in freedom and have a chance to develop our souls. If we had to live a while in some of the other countries, we shouldn't take our benefits so much for granted."

"That's so," supplemented George. "We can't imagine what it is to have to kow-tow to a Kaiser or yell for a Czar that we hate like poison. It must seem pretty good to some of those down-trodden Europeans to get over here."

"Yes, but what enrages me," said Meta wrathfully, "is the black ingratitude of a lot of them after they get here. They come just to get what they can out of us, and they haven't the faintest idea what we stand for. Our grandfathers fought at Bunker Hill and froze at Valley Forge to save the ideals of democracy from destruction, and then a lot of Russian 'Reds' and German anarchists come over here, and want to snatch everything that they can, and destroy the very government that has given them the freedom to come and snatch!" She paused, breathless from her eloquence.

"They're always howling about the sweatshops and the capitalists," George went on while Meta took breath. "Who is it that runs their blooming sweatshops? I'll bet you you wouldn't find one na-

tive American if you went through them with a fine-toothed comb. It's the immigrants' own kind that grind them down, and then they want to blow up the government with dynamite because they suffer from conditions that they've made, themselves. And as for the capitalists, I'd like to see one of those yip-yapping Russians get hold of a half-million and see how much of it he'd want to share with the populace. What he didn't spend for limousines and silk hats he'd hold onto like grim death. The place for any one who doesn't like our government is back where he came from."

"You couldn't pry them out of America with a crow-bar," exploded Rodney. "What they want is to get all they can out of us with one hand, and stab us in the back with the other."

"We've been too liberal in our immigration laws," said Mr. Houston judicially. "Now we ought to try to repair the damage by keeping out the riff-raff for a while, and giving ourselves a chance."

"The reason we've let them in," interposed Mrs. Houston, "is that we have wanted them to do our manual labor. The native American won't work with his hands. He thinks he's too good for that."

"And he usually is, too," said Rodney. "If he has intelligence, he ought to have a chance to use it."

"Well, every man has his place," answered Mrs. Houston placidly. "But the place for aliens and traitors is not in America. We should teach the foreigners our ideals."

"All very well, but hordes of them don't want to learn," said Meta passionately.

"Then they should be sent back where they like things better."

"It makes me furious," Isabel burst out, "to have the Europeans always sneering about our being such a mercenary nation. You never see *anybody* pinch the pennies here as they do over there. As a matter of fact we're the most generous and idealistic nation in the world."

"Our idealism hasn't helped them out much in the present situation," said Mr. Houston dryly.

"But it will," prophesied George. "We'll get into it. We'll have to. And then they'll see what idealism *plus* brawn and brains can do."

"If they can hang on long enough so that there's anything to fight for when we get in," remarked Mr. Houston.

"Oh, dear, we're spoiling our lovely day by war-talk," complained Isabel.

"I don't know how it could be better spent." Mr. Houston gave her a keen glance from his dark eyes.

Isabel felt reproved. "I suppose not," she said hastily. "Do you belong to the Daughters of the Revolution, Mrs. Houston?" she asked.

"Yes, I've belonged for a good while. I have a pin somewhere about."

"I want to join when I get older," said Isabel. "My great-grandfather Carleton was —"

"If you're going to swap ancestor stories, we'll find something else to do," Rodney interrupted with a laugh. He had as gallant ancestors as anybody, but saw no reason for talking about them.

Everybody rose from the table. Mrs. Houston

and Isabel swapped ancestor stories while they cleared away the lunch dishes. "You go on and practice your voice exercises while we wash the dishes," said Isabel to Meta. "You haven't done your exercises to-day. And thank you for the Gettysburg speech. We got so excited over the immigrants that we forgot to be polite."

"Don't mention it," called Meta over her shoulder. She was on her way to the secluded spot in the ravine, where she practiced her exercises in voice control.

Some time after, as Isabel stepped out on the flat space in front of the tent, she saw George, who had been reading a magazine, start up and stare out into the mouth of the ravine with a look of anxiety.

"What is it?" asked Isabel in a surprised tone.

"I just saw one of the workmen slinking along out there with a gun," George answered quickly.

"I wonder what he's up to?"

"Perhaps he's seen a coyote," ventured Isabel.

"They don't come so near the camp. I don't like the looks of it."

"He wouldn't —" Isabel took alarm from the expression on George's face.

"Let's go and see."

With one accord, they leaped down the sloping hillside, and hurried toward the narrower cut of the ravine. Meta's voice floated out rather faintly, for she was at some distance away. They could catch the words, "I am —" and the rest faded into an echo.

"Where's that Greaser gone to?" murmured George. "Ah, there he is!"

The man, a rough dark Mexican, stepped out from behind a clump of junipers, where he had been crouching. He was so intent on himself that he had not noticed George and Isabel. His face was wild, and he was clutching his gun feverishly.

"Hey, Joaquin, what you doing with that gun?" called George in a voice which was studiedly under control.

The man started and gasped. "Ah, *Señor, el espectro!*" he replied,— "the speerit." He lifted his free hand. "Oye!"

A voice repeated slowly and mournfully the line from "Hamlet," "*I am thy father's spirit.*" Again it came, with a different intonation.

"Ha! the speer-it," Joaquin muttered, while a look of awe settled on his face. "I keel him. See — *la carabina!* I keel!"

He started forward. George rushed to him and laid a hand upon his arm. "No, no," he said sternly. "Wait. Give me the gun."

He took the gun from the resisting hand of the workman. Then "Meta!" called George in a loud, peremptory tone. "Meta, come here quickly."

The voice stopped, and was followed by the sound of footsteps on the gravel. Joaquin stood quaking, half persuaded to run.

Meta, very calm and trim, in a white blouse and piqué skirt, came into view. She walked forward, looking surprised to see the group,— George holding the gun and detaining Joaquin, Isabel clasping her hands in terror and suspense.

"What's the matter?" asked Meta, surveying the trio.

"There's your spirit," said George to Joaquin —
" *La Señorita — Señorita Houston.*"

" *La hija de Señor Houston,*" stammered Isabel, who knew only a few words of Spanish. " *No es-pectro — no spirit.*"

Meta came closer, frowning with perplexity. "What is it all about?" she queried.

"Joaquin, here, got a wrong idea into his head," George explained. "Come, Joaquin, take hold of her hand. Let him touch you, Meta."

The man shrank away, partly with fear, and partly with horror at his own mistake. Meta held out a strong white hand. The workman touched it hesitatingly with his hard dirty fingers. Then he burst into frenzied explanations, apologies, and protestations in mixed English and Spanish. The words *pardon, Señorita, I mistake — I sorr-ree* stood out now and then in the avalanche of unintelligible phrases.

Isabel was pale. "Oh, Meta! he thought you were a ghost — a spirit. Don't you remember George's telling us at the table that some one of the workmen had asked the meaning of *speer-it*? He had heard you saying over and over, '*I am thy father's spirit.*' He was terrified. He was going to —" She motioned toward the gun.

Meta retained her self-possession. "Oh, I don't believe he would have done anything," she said coolly. "He would have found out his mistake."

"I hope so," said Isabel doubtfully.

Joaquin was going on with his apologies and gesticulations.

"There, there, it's all right, old man," said

George soothingly. "Don't take it so hard. Your arms'll drop off if you aren't careful, and you'll have to use the shovel with your teeth." His jocular tone reassured the man, who subsided into a less excited volley of excuses.

"We got him in time, anyhow, Meta," George went on, looking at the tall beautiful girl with eyes that said more than his lips. Isabel saw that his hands were unsteady, now that the danger was over. "If I hadn't spotted him —"

"I'm glad you did," Meta remarked. When she was most moved, she said the least.

"Go on back, Joaquin," said George. "It's all right. But don't try it again."

"*Non otra vez*," admonished Isabel stumblingly.

The man shook his head vehemently. "*Non otra vez*," he repeated.

"I suppose that's Greaser for 'Never again!'" George smiled.

Isabel turned toward the house. She felt that George and Meta wanted to be together. Back at the house, she privately related the episode to Mrs. Houston, who, with her usual good sense, took the matter calmly,—grateful that no harm had come from the superstitious folly of the Mexican.

Later, looking out from the tent door, Isabel saw Rodney at work at the bridge, reinforcing and improving it. She wandered down, and watched while he worked, saying nothing about the incident of the "speer-it." Rodney was hard at work constructing a small hand-rail at the side of the narrow foot-bridge.

The conversation of the two young people was

desultory, and broken by long pauses. "It's awfully nice of you not to say anything jeering about my fall and floundering," said Isabel when the hand-rail was completed.

"Let bygones be bygones," Rodney replied. "I don't believe in keeping a thing up too long. Now, do you want to go over to the other side? I'm going to make a stone fireplace for boiling the coffee at our picnic to-night. You may help if you like."

"Dee-lighted!" Isabel made her way lightly across the bridge with a smile for the remembrance of her tumble.

"The Promised Land" was one of those small unexpected meadows which one finds among the Western mountains — an acre or so of fresh green grass surrounded by the sterner slope of rocky hill-side.

"It's worth some effort in getting here, isn't it?" said the young man.

"Oh, it's lovely. I wish I knew a better word," Isabel responded. "The grass is full of white violets — the exquisite things!" She knelt to pluck a few of the small purple-veined white flowers which starred the green. She could hardly leave them even for the fascinating task of constructing the fireplace. Rodney was extremely skillful in the art of providing an out-of-door fire; he had learned it in many outings in the forests of the Middle West.

When the primitive stove had been finished and the rubbish cleared away, Rodney said, "Let's walk down and take a look at the weir on this side of the creek. You've hardly seen it. Of course it's just in the early stages as yet." The women of the party

had been advised to keep away from the workmen's camp and the active operations of building.

"I'd like to see it at close range," said Isabel.

They walked down the bank of the creek for some little distance, until they came to the place which the young men had selected for their work. Here they saw the posts and markers which had been driven in, and the foundation of concrete blocks. Across the stream were the trough for mixing the concrete, the rough timbers for the frame, and other signs of the heavy labor which was involved. Rodney explained to Isabel the way in which the weir would work when it was completed, to measure the pressure of the mountain stream, and the water-power which it could supply.

"Some one has to stay and watch it and take the records for a long time,—months perhaps," he said. "But our job is only to get the thing done, with all the measurements accurate and everything in good shape. We're to stay and look after the records for a week or two, and I'm glad of that, for it makes our time here a little longer."

"It looks mysterious to me," said Isabel. "But of course I don't know anything about that sort of work." She listened and stared as intelligently as she could while Rodney went through his explanations. "It'll be awfully solid, won't it," she remarked, "when you get all the concrete in place?"

"It ought to be as solid as the rocks," Rodney answered with some complacence. "We're building as if it were for all time."

"I'm glad it's coming out so well," said Isabel happily. "And, oh, goodness! I must go and

help get the picnic supper ready. We were all going to assist, and then no one would be burdened."

She found Meta and Mrs. Houston making sandwiches of several sorts. Isabel busied herself with the salad. Mr. Houston, who had been reading and playing solitaire, came to carry the things down the hill and across the stream. George also turned up with offers of assistance.

As the shadows grew longer in the valley, the family gathered about the white cloth spread upon the grass. Rodney came in for a considerable amount of praise for the hand-rail which he had made, for the stone fireplace, and the strong hot coffee.

"A picnic is the nicest sort of meal there is," said Isabel, after every one was well started. "When I'm at one, I always wonder why we don't eat in this way all the time."

"Perhaps the pleasure might wear off," said Mr. Houston. "But I'm keen for them myself. I wish we could have them often."

"We can, now that the bridge is built across Jordan," said Meta.

The meal was eaten with enjoyment in the midst of easy conversation and the sense of expansion which a free horizon gives.

"We've always had so many picnics in Jefferson that it seems glorious to bring them with us out here," persisted Isabel, who was in a state of exaltation.

"Jefferson seems mighty far away," Rodney remarked. "The point of view is so different out here."

They fell to talking of those whom they had

known at Jefferson: Evelyn Taylor, who had married Fred Delafield (they were living in Portland, and Isabel hoped to visit them if she went to Seattle); and Iola Fleming, the poetess, who was looking forward to a career, now that she had been graduated from college; and Herbert Barry, who had gone to France in the early winter, to serve in the American Ambulance work.

Rodney had had a letter from Herbert. "It's a strange letter," he said,—“full of reticences where one wants long accounts of thrilling adventures, and eloquent over the probabilities of America's entering the war. One would rather not read those parts.”

"It's a beautiful letter," exclaimed Isabel. "Herbert puts everything so simply, and yet it has such a lot of emotion behind it. I never knew he could write so well — prose, I mean."

"I think Herb has a future," added Rodney.

"Isn't it splendid that those four poems of his have been published in the magazines!" cried Meta, who admired achievement of every sort. "I know he could get a lot more published if he tried."

"You know he says he hasn't time to bother with verse," Rodney answered. "He never puts it on paper now, unless it comes to him at a time when he is free, which isn't once in a blue moon, I judge."

"Living is a thousand times more important than writing, anyhow," said George who was not of a particularly literary turn of mind.

"At least one hasn't much to say in writing until he's done a good deal of living," Isabel meditated.

"I see that now, but it's not long since I didn't."

"And it's usually only the discipline of living that makes one willing to sit down and toil over a book," said Mrs. Houston. "Writing a book is a tedious task at the best. I know, because I have a friend who writes, and she is always wishing that some one would invent a self-writing novel."

"Then we'd all be authors of best-sellers," laughed Meta, beginning on another sandwich. "Even Dad, here, the Silent Listener, would be grinding them out."

"I've often wished that I could write what I've seen," returned Mr. Houston, seriously. "In my travels and adventures in lumber camps and mining towns, in the States and British Columbia and Alaska, I've run across many a strange story — romantic and picturesque things that it seems one could never invent in the world."

"Why don't you try writing them?" inquired Isabel eagerly. It seemed a pity for good copy to go to waste. "Perhaps you're a literary genius without knowing it."

"Afraid not." Mr. Houston shook his head. "Business is more in my line. May I have another cup of coffee?"

"Why don't you try it, Gilbert?" asked Mrs. Houston.

"The coffee? I've had one cup, and it's not bad, not bad at all." Mr. Houston looked innocent.

"You know what I mean — writing your stories of the Northwest. I've heard that there is a constant demand for that sort of thing."

"I'm too lazy when I'm not busy, and too busy

when I'm not lazy." Mr. Houston sweetened his coffee deliberately.

"That's the trouble with a good many geniuses in the literary lines, I suppose," said George.

"I'll prod you on," promised Mrs. Houston.

"I will, too," said Meta.

"Too much prodding makes even a mule obstinate. I might possibly try my skill as a Stewart Edward White or a Rex Beach if you two let me alone; but I am sure I should never do anything if you kept nagging me." A smile glinted in Mr. Houston's eye, as he glanced at his wife and daughter.

"Then we'll plead speechlessly," his wife returned. "We'll find a way."

"We all ought to get inspiration out of this summer for whatever we're going to do," Isabel remarked. "I don't doubt that we'll be feeling the influence of it twenty years from now."

"We ought to remember this salad," said Meta, who thought that last remark rather too sentimental. "You always make good ones, Isabel, but this is extra-fine."

"Nothing tastes so good in-doors as it does out in the open," said the salad-maker modestly.

They finished the meal with leisurely banter. "The children ought to be coming soon," said Mrs. Houston. She and the girls were gathering up the dishes, while the men went to lay out the fireworks and make preparations for setting them off.

Soon a distant sound of horses' hoofs vibrated in the still air. "There they come!" cried Isabel.

The three women hurried across the bridge to meet their little guests. Mr. Hurd and his assistant had brought the two youngsters on horseback. Each man held one of the children in front of him in the saddle.

Rose and Freddy were wide-eyed with interest at the sight of the village, with the three cabins and the tent, with the out-door table, and various campstools and rugs scattered about. "It's almost like Indians, isn't it?" said Rose shyly.

"Do we look like Indians?" teased Isabel. "Do we wear moccasins, and have our hair tied up with red rags?"

"No, you look just like real people, and your hair is awful pretty — everybody's." Rose looked from Isabel's bright hair to Meta's dark braids, and then to Mrs. Houston's soft brown coronet.

"That's the way to win our hearts," said Meta, who was never quite at ease with children. She had never had much opportunity to be with them.

"Where's the fireworks?" asked Freddy in an awed tone. "Are they in that tent?"

"They're going to be right up there on that flat place across the ravine," explained Isabel. She was cuddling Rose up to her hungrily, and thinking of little sister Celia at home in Jefferson.

George Burnham and Mr. Houston had set up a rough framework for the pin-wheels and Roman candles. "The audience is to sit out here in the front yard," announced George, "and it is expected to applaud wildly at anything that pleases it."

"We ought to wear mittens, then, for we'll be clapping our hands till they're calloused," said Isa-

bel. "We're going to be particularly pleased at everything."

They all settled themselves on chairs and cushions and rugs. Freddy sat between his father and Mrs. Houston, uncertain which one he wanted most to be with. "Did you say you had seen fireworks?" asked Mrs. Houston.

"We have fire-crackers every Fourth," said Rose, "and at Auntie's we saw some of those things that go *whiz-z-z* and spout right up into the sky, like a great big bouquet of stars."

"And then they all go out, and the sky is dark again," Freddy added, in an explanatory tone.

"That's just the kind that we're going to have to-night," said Isabel,— "great big bouquets of stars."

The sky was turning to cold blue, and the real stars were appearing faintly over the mountain peaks. In the valleys, heavy shadows had fallen, and a white mist was rising over the Promised Land.

There was a bit of impatience among the audience when a readjustment of the framework was found necessary. In the meantime, the workmen from the camp below had gathered at some distance but where they could obtain a good view of the goings-on.

"Now get ready," called George from across the shallow ravine. Rose clasped Isabel's hand and sat breathless.

With a crescendo *whoos-s-h*, a Roman candle sprang into the air, scattering its colored lights profusely above the stream, where they stood reflected for a moment and then died out.

"How beautiful!" A murmur circulated among

the spectators. Rose tightened her clasp of Isabel's hand without a word.

More candles sputtered and blazed against the darkening background of the hills. They threw out great green and yellow bubbles which, one by one, faltered in the air, and sank toward the earth, fading before they reached it. The spectators clapped joyfully as each particular candle had its fleeting space of beauty before it passed away.

"When will they have the big, big spouting ones?" inquired Freddy eagerly.

"Right now," Isabel rejoined.

As if in response to their hope, a splendid rocket rose majestically into the dusk, spraying fountains of light. Gazing at its exquisite stars and flecks of flame, the groups upon the banks burst into exclamations.

Rose quivered. "It's like fairyland, isn't it?" she whispered into Isabel's ear.

"It's like fairyland and dreamland, and everything lovely," Isabel whispered in return. "And aren't we glad we're here?"

"*Mm-huh!* I'm so glad you asked me!"

Isabel curled her arm closer around the child, and gave herself up to the rich enjoyment of the hour,—the hush of the evening, the beauty of the peaks, the ever-recurring wonder of the colored lights, the warm companionship of friends and little children. She was very happy, with the unquestioning contentment which does not look into the future, but takes the good at hand and draws it to oneself.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOUD-BURST

ANOTHER week slipped away, filled with the self-appointed tasks of the "lily-fingered loungers," as George unjustly called the freer individuals of the party; and with the steady labors of the engineers and their crew. The weather was for the most part clear, with warm days and cool evenings. The villagers spent much of their time out of doors, riding up and down the valley on horseback, climbing about the hills, or sitting on the bank of the stream with books or sewing. Twice there were picnics in the Promised Land. Once during the week the Hurd children were brought down from the Big Indian to spend the afternoon with their new friends. On Thursday, Mr. Houston found that pressing business demanded his leaving at once, and he departed hurriedly for a trip the length of which he could not predict.

The work on the weir had now progressed to a stage which promised completion within a short time. The spirits of the two young men rose as the days flew by and their activities went on without serious obstacle. The workmen remained tractable, though still mysterious and fiery. They seemed to be well under control, and to work with some degree of in-

dustry in spite of the fact that they had to be constantly watched and urged. The "pumphandle method" of talk proved various and effective.

Sunday came again, with its relief from the labors of the week. After dinner, Rodney said to Isabel, "What do you say to our exploring the region on the other side of the Promised Land? We haven't any of us gone beyond the farther edge of the meadow."

"I'd like to, tremendously," Isabel answered, pleased at the prospect of new adventures.

"Are you good for it?" asked Rodney. "It's quite a tramp and climb. I don't want you to get so tired that you won't enjoy it."

"I think I'm good for it," Isabel replied. "You know I'm a pretty good walker, and I'm getting awfully hard with all this exercise every day. I'll promise to be game."

"All right. See that you haven't any chifions on that will spoil." He looked disapprovingly at her pale green chambray dress trimmed with white embroidery. "That's pretty, but it won't do."

"Goodness, this washes just like anything," Isabel smiled. "But I'll go and put on something more to the taste of the 'personal conductor.'" She went to change into more suitable clothing, and to tell Mrs. Houston that she and Rodney were going for a walk. "That's all right, isn't it?" she asked.

"Perfectly," said Mrs. Houston, looking up from the letter which she was writing. "Rodney will take care of you. But don't go too far, and be sure to get back by supper-time. Don't you think it

would be nice to take a sandwich? It would refresh you after your tramp, before you start back."

"I'll take one apiece," said Isabel, "but we aren't going to be gone very long, I think."

She went into the kitchen and made two substantial chicken sandwiches, which she wrapped in oiled paper and tied into a neat parcel. "Here, Rod, put this into your coat pocket," she said, as the two young people started on their jaunt, which was to prove more strenuous than they anticipated.

The hot sun was pouring down into the valley, and there was a drowsiness in the atmosphere, heavier and more oppressive than usual, even at this time of day.

Isabel and Rodney crossed the bridge, with a smile for the remembrance of its history. "It's a good solid bridge, now," remarked Rodney. "It will be here forty years from now, when we have a reunion out here."

"Yes, when we all come out in private cars — or will it be private aëroplanes, then? — with children and grandchildren and maids and valets and private secretaries," bubbled Isabel, amused at the thought.

"George and I will be fat old burghers with our pockets full of gold," prophesied Rodney. "And we'll point out to the grandchildren that it was here that we made our start in life — fought our way to fortune and renown."

"And then I suppose you'll say solemnly to them, 'Go thou and do likewise,' " suggested Isabel.

"More likely they'll be spending the money that we earned with honest toil," Rodney answered.

"But say! isn't it fine to be walking on a carpet of violets?"

"I hate to walk on them, but there's nowhere else to step," said Isabel, watching her heavy shoes sink into the flowery grass. "But there isn't very much of this. We'll soon have the rocks and gravel again."

They followed the edge of the grass, and then stepped out upon a slope which was covered with the thick bunches of forget-me-nots which flourished on so many sandy hillsides. Isabel could hardly pass the flowers, for each tuft seemed more wonderfully perfect than the last. After a while the forget-me-nots gave way to scanty dry grass and juniper bushes, with a little sage and cactus. And then the travelers found themselves among small scrub-oaks and scraggy pines.

"It's a real forest that we're coming to," said Isabel, stopping to look up the long slant of the mountain side. "I never realized, just looking at it from the door of the Ritz, that the trees were so high and so thick."

"One is often deceived here in the mountains, if he judges by the way things look," answered her companion. "Here's quite a stiff climb, for a minute or two. Want any help?"

"Oh, no, I can make it." Isabel scrambled up the steep short ascent which led to a more gradual slope. They were now among pines, growing sturdily out of a rocky soil and between large boulders and piles of stones.

"It's worse going than I thought," said Rodney. "Rest a few minutes."

They sat on a rock and took breath for a moment. "How dark it is here in the woods," said Isabel.

"Clouding up a little, too, I guess," said Rodney carelessly.

They clambered on, until they reached a point above the stretch of pines, and came out upon a ledge which overlooked the slope up which they had come. In spite of their being accustomed to exertion, they were both breathing hard with the effort of the climb. Here they stood, with the pine-covered hillside below them, then the more open spaces, then the yellow-green of the little meadow, with the stream and the three cabins still farther on.

They had not had time for more than a glance before the gloom of the sky arrested them. "Oh, see," cried Isabel. "Those great black clouds are pouring over the mountain tops, from the west. How threatening they look!"

The eastern half of the sky was rapidly succumbing to the onrush of dark clouds, which were rolling across the world.

"It looks as if we were in for a pretty bad storm," said Rodney, much disturbed. "We must get under cover somewhere. I don't want you to be drenched."

They glanced around and behind them, to where the mountain side still ascended. "Maybe there's some nook up there," Isabel murmured vaguely. She was not keen for being out in the sort of storm which she suspected to be coming.

"Wait here. I'll see what there is." Rodney scrambled up the back of the ledge and made his way farther up among the rocks.

Isabel turned to look once more over the valley, fast darkening under the lowering heavens. A roll of thunder sounded along the farther hills; another quickly followed.

Rodney called to her from above. "I've found a place. Can you come up?"

Isabel started up the acclivity, and Rodney came to meet her, giving her his hand for the last few steps. She shuddered under the gloom of the gray mountains, from which all brightness had fled away.

"Here," said Rodney briefly.

Isabel saw an overhanging cliff, of solid rock, with a shadowy space of shelter underneath. "No snakes, I hope," she said warily, peering into the nook.

"No knowing. I don't see any." Rodney went into the shallow recess and scuffled about. "It's all right," he reassured the girl. "Nothing here but grass and pine needles and oak leaves." Isabel went in. It was a crude shelter, but effective. "If the wind doesn't get around directly in front of us, we're all right," Rodney went on cheerfully.

"I hope it won't. I'm not particularly anxious to get soaked. But we have a reserved seat for the drama, haven't we?" she conceded, willing to get what consolation she could from the unpleasant predicament.

"A box seat at that," answered Rodney. He looked troubled.

The thunder had grown almost continuous, and thin flashes of lightning vivified the dark sky.

"Look! the cabins are almost gone," said Isabel,

straining her gaze across the valley, where the "village" was being swallowed up in shadow. "I suppose the rest of the crowd have snuggled up in the Ritz and started a fire on the hearth. And they're wondering where we are. I should have told Mrs. Houston just where we were going."

"Too bad. I hope they won't worry. There isn't a thing they can do. And we are really all right," Rodney added, as if to keep up the spirits of the other.

Isabel jumped as a wilder flash of lightning tore across the clouds. The thunder had now become tumultuous, roaring from peak to peak, and reverberating down the valleys. Rain began to fall; first in big scattered drops, and then in a pelting down-pour.

"It's a real old-fashioned summer-afternoon thunder storm," cried Isabel above the rush of rain.

She and Rodney shrank back against the wall of their shelter, abashed at the sense of isolation and powerlessness which had come over them. They could see a bit of the sky, with the blur of water streaming down in thick sheets, which wiped out all the solid ground beneath.

"There seems to be nothing in the world but this dry rock and the downfall of the rain." Rodney raised his voice to make himself heard. A torrent was running off the edge of the cliff under which they cowered, sweeping with it a little avalanche of sticks, pebbles, and grass, mixed with white foam. The water splattered under the edge of their nook, but did not come back to where they were standing.

Isabel put her hands over her face. It seemed as if the world were full of wild noises, clashings and roarings and reëchoings of terror.

Rodney bethought himself to put his coat on the ground. He motioned to Isabel to sit on it; the uproar was so great that it seemed as useless to speak as it had seemed in the stamp-mill at the Big Indian. Isabel sat down and covered her eyes again, but Rodney stood staring straight into the torrents outside.

"It's a great sight, Isabel," he shouted. "You shouldn't miss it."

The girl took her hands away from her eyes. "Ugh, it's terrible," she groaned, as she watched the snakelike writhings of the lightning and the savage thrusts of electric spears into the valley.

A long time the marooned pleasure-seekers held their positions. They felt as if the concentrated storms of all the ages were sweeping over them. "It's a cloud-burst, I believe," said Rodney. "I don't know what time we'll get home," he grumbled, looking at his wrist-watch.

"Home is a very attractive word just now," answered Isabel. To her the three little cabins across the river were a perfect center of shelter and protection and friendliness. An endless time they sat waiting for the storm to slacken. Rodney reached for the parcel of sandwiches, which he had placed on a projecting bit of rock, and handed it to Isabel. She unrolled it, and divided the slight repast between them. They sat munching and meditating, but not trying to say much. "I wish I'd put in more," said Isabel, when the last crumb was gone.

"I wish I had a drink of water," said Rodney.

There had come a cessation in the noise and down-pour. In the comparative quiet, the two young people were aware of the presence of some one else. There was a noise of something moving in the extension of the shelter, beyond a curve in the cliff. Isabel thought of a bear, and her heart nearly stopped beating. But at that moment a head poked itself around the edge of the cliff from the regions under the rocks, which the wanderers had not had time to explore.

Isabel was almost as startled as if a bear had really appeared. Rodney sprang up in a defensive attitude. The head had a hat on it, and beneath the hat were two twinkling eyes and a bushy gray beard. "Excuse me," said the head, "I didn't know who was sharing my diggings." The man to whom the head belonged came around the edge of the cliff, shrinking against the rock to keep from being splashed by the rain. He was an elderly person, dressed roughly in a nondescript costume. "Don't be scared," he went on earnestly. "I'm a harmless fellow. I would have made myself known sooner, but I guess I was asleep."

"You must be a good sleeper," said Rodney, "to be able to get a wink in this din."

"Maybe he's Rip Van Winkle himself," thought Isabel. She said as easily as she could, "Have you been asleep for twenty years?"

"No, I'm not Rip," the old man chuckled, enjoying the joke. "My name is Hale, Matthew Hale. I suppose you're wonderin' where I turned up from. Well, I was prospectin' around this place — I know

this region well — and when I saw the storm comin' on, I just crawled into this dry place under these rocks and went to sleep. I'm used to these here up-roars. They don't make much impression on me."

"But this was a dreadful storm," said Isabel. "It is yet, for that matter, though it has calmed down a little."

"A cloud-burst up the valley, I reckon," said the old man casually. "Don't you want to take a look into my flat?"

The others craned their necks around the edge of the rocks, and saw that the nook in which Hale had been sleeping was really deeper and better than their own.

"It's goin' to clear," said the old man. "I don't believe we'll have to stay here forever. How did you two youngsters happen to be caught in this partic'lar spot?"

Isabel smiled at Rodney's being called a youngster. She didn't mind, herself. "We started out for a climb up the mountain side," Rodney explained. "We're camping on the other side of the creek, across the valley, there. You can't see the place for the rain."

"Oh, ho! In them three cabins next to the little ravine?" asked the old man with interest. "Hm, is that so? I know 'em well. Camped in 'em myself,—my two partners and me."

The others looked at him in astonishment. "Did you, really?" answered Isabel.

"Yes, I know all about 'em," Hale went on. "Now in the middle one —"

"The Ritz," murmured the girl.

"Eh? Well, in the middle one there's a fireplace that ain't exactly in the center, and there's a kind of little cupboard cut into the logs at the right. Isn't that so, young lady?"

"You really have been in it," Isabel smiled. "I'm living in it myself, now, and I certainly am enjoying it."

"I suppose you're a prospector," said Rodney, drawing the old man out.

"Yes, I've been lookin' for gold amongst these hills for years. Sometimes I go as far south as Wyoming, and sometimes as far north as Alaska. But mostly I circulate around here."

"I had an idea that sort of thing was over," Rodney said — "that the time had gone by when the real individual prospector existed, except in books."

"Oh, no, fer from it." The old man twisted his face into a wry smile. "Of course there ain't as many as there used to be of us; but there's just as much gold in these mountains as ever was taken out. The thing is to find it, and somebody'll keep huntin' it as long as it's here."

"I don't see why they shouldn't," said Rodney politely.

The storm had now slackened into an ordinary downfall of rain, which, however, seemed very reluctant to stop. It would almost die away, and then begin again, when the group under the rocks were ready to venture forth. The afternoon was waning. Isabel noted that Rodney had an extremely anxious look, and she wondered whether it were all on her account.

"You'll get dreadfully wet going through the un-

derbrush," he said; "and you'll ruin your shoes, I'm afraid."

Isabel tried to look cheerful. She dreaded plunging into the wooded spaces below, and traversing the mud of the meadow. "Never mind. My clothes will wash," she said, "and these shoes are so heavy that I don't think anything could hurt them."

"You don't want to wear fripperies when you come out into the mountains," admonished the old man. "And to my mind it's not much of a place for girls, anyhow."

"I don't know that it is," Rodney half-agreed. "It will be almost dark when we get back," he continued. "We'll have to go as fast as we can without tiring you all out, so as to get home before it gets completely dark."

"I'll do the best I can," Isabel responded with a brave face and a sinking heart.

The rain had now almost ceased, and the clouds had thinned. "I don't b'lieve it's goin' to come down like Jehu any more." Matthew Hale bent forth and gazed earnestly at the heavens. With his ancient and grizzled look, he reminded Isabel of Noah peering forth from the Ark, in the vicinity of Mount Ararat. She gave an hysterical giggle, and Rodney eyed her apprehensively.

"I'm all right, Rod," she reassured him. "I just had a foolish thought."

"Well, perhaps we'd better set out," Rodney remarked. As they ventured forth from their shelter, Isabel looked back at it wistfully. It seemed like comfort, compared to the vexations of the return journey to camp.

Scrambling and sliding, the three people made their way down the steep declivity, where rivulets of rain were still gurgling over the rocks, and marking the surface sand with tiny furrows. Every step was uncertain on the slippery way. Isabel was glad of the occasional support of the old man's hand, or Rodney's.

"I won't be a clinging vine," she said to herself,—"if I can help it." She made every effort to go alone, and not to cry out with irritation or fear when progress appeared particularly impossible.

"You're game, if I do say it," Matthew Hale remarked admiringly.

In the wooded regions, things were a trifle better; but the ground was slippery with the wet pine needles, and the raindrops dripped mercilessly from the boughs, soaking Isabel's shirt-waist about the shoulders and sleeves. The underbrush whipped her in the face, for she would not let the two men stop to hold it away from her. They all stopped now and then to rest, for Isabel sorely needed a chance to breathe. On the edge of the woodland, she leaned against a scrub oak, while Matthew Hale scanned the heavens. Isabel saw that the look of troubled suspense had not left the face of her companion. "Don't worry, Rod," she said, "we'll be all right. We're 'out of the woods' now, and the worst is over."

"The worst may be yet to come." The young man's aspect was gloomy.

"What do you mean?"

Rodney hesitated, and then burst out, "If the weir is only all right!"

"The weir!" Isabel had not thought of that.

"Yes. There has been a terrific spurt of water in the stream. Perhaps —"

"But the weir is solid concrete — solid as the rocks. Nothing could happen to it."

"I — hope not."

Isabel did not reply. The idea that anything could happen to the weir was to her mere foolishness. Silently they started down the gradual descent toward the meadow. The way was rough and wearying. Isabel had long since ceased to care how she looked, so centered was her mind on what Rodney had just said, and on her increasing exhaustion. "I hope they'll have a hot supper ready," she panted.

"Maybe they'll be out looking for us," suggested Rodney.

"They must know that we can take care of ourselves," replied Isabel fretfully. The idea of being searched for, like Babes in the Wood, was vexing to her. She went on courageously, and felt a leap of joy when her feet sank into the wet grass of the Promised Land. The rushing of the stream grew louder, and a light flashed from the cabins across the channel. "Shall we call?" she said to Rodney.

"Wait. We must see about the bridge." Rodney's voice was low and strained.

The feet of the trio made chug-chugging noises in the mire. The old man put his hand under Isabel's elbow and helped her through the worst of the muddy grass. Silently the group reached the bank of the stream, trying to make out landmarks in the gloom,

"The bridge is gone!" said Rodney.

"I was a-wonderin' how you expected to get Missey across," remarked Matthew Hale.

The tumbling and foaming waters showed a wider stretch than had been there before. The trio stood pondering. Isabel was so fatigued that she hardly cared whether she ever got "across Jordan" or not. But the Ritz-Carlton, with its cot and fireplace, seemed like an inaccessible heaven.

"Guess we'll have to carry her," said Matthew Hale cheerfully. "Is there a better place to wade?"

"This is the shallowest place," said Rodney. "That's why we put the bridge here."

"Well, then, come on," said the old man in a hearty tone, "we'll make a chair, same as we used to when we was kids, and carry the Princess acrost the ragin' stream."

"That's the only way, I guess," assented Rodney.

Isabel listened submissively. It crossed her mind that Rodney was probably wild to go and look at the weir, farther down the river. "But it's all right, of course," she thought peevishly. "Any one would think it was a baby."

The two men crossed their hands, grasping each other's wrists, and made a "chair," in which Isabel was seated, steadying herself by a hand on the wet shoulders of her bearers. She was not too tired to feel a shivering fear lest the current should take them off their feet. "And then," she thought, "we'll all go down into the waves of Jordan."

Cautiously the two men set their feet into the

stream, and went forward, feeling the ground beneath them. The water swirled about their legs, rising to their knees and above. Isabel held her breath as the men shuffled slowly across the widened channel.

"No swapping horses in the middle of the stream," the old man chuckled.

Isabel's tension relaxed when they reached the farther shore, and she was deposited upon the bank. She stood shivering, staring longingly at the lights in the cabins.

Rodney put his hands to his lips, and gave a loud *whoo-hoo*, which brought an immediate response from above. A door opened, and George Burnham rushed down the slope with a lighted lantern in his hand. The two others followed at a slower pace.

"Well, well," cried George, "where on earth have you been? Are you all right?"

"Perfectly all right," Rodney answered, controlling his voice. "Isabel is just about worn out. Some storm, wasn't it?"

"I should say." George was holding up his lantern, with a curious glance at the old man. Something in his voice told Rodney that his fears had come true.

"It's all up with the weir, I suppose," he said dully. Isabel saw that he was pale in the lantern light.

"Yes. The freshet did for it," said George in an expressionless tone. He had had his moment of despair, and had gained his self-command.

"Oh, no! Not really!" Isabel burst out incredulously.

Neither George nor Rodney said a word. They only looked at each other. George lowered his lantern, drawing a long breath. There was a moment of poignant distress; and then Mrs. Houston came up and slipped her arm around Isabel's waist.

"You poor child," she said affectionately, "you must have had a trying time."

Meta was at Isabel's other side, pressing a kiss on the wanderer's wet cheek. Rodney was explaining Matthew Hale to George.

"I'm absolutely all right," Isabel assured her friends; "only tired and wet and hungry. But is it true about the weir?" she asked in a subdued voice.

"George says so," answered Meta.

"But what —?" Isabel began.

"Never mind now," interrupted Mrs. Houston. "Come into the house and get these wet clothes off." She drew the girl into the Ritz, where a fire was burning on the hearth.

Isabel sank into a chair. She was pale, and her hair was disheveled from being caught in overhanging boughs. Her clothes were dirty and torn, and her shoes were a mass of mud. With kind hands, the two other women helped her to get into a dressing gown.

"Where were you during the cloud-burst?" asked Mrs. Houston.

"In a kind of cave under a projecting rock. It was dry there. We thought the storm would soon be over."

"Then how did you get so wet?"

"Coming through the woods and underbrush on

the mountain side, and then through the mud in the Promised Land."

"The bridge went out, of course," said Meta.

"Yes, Mr. Hale and Rod carried me across. I don't know what we should have done if Rod had been alone." She gave a humorous account of finding the old man, and of his odd remarks.

Mrs. Houston was putting more wood on the fire. "I'll get you something to eat," said Meta. "We kept it warm in the kitchen."

"Did you worry about me?" asked Isabel, when Meta had gone.

"Not really, dear," answered Mrs. Houston, hanging Isabel's wet skirt over a chair to dry. "I knew that you and Rodney could take care of yourselves."

"I'm glad of that," said Isabel. "It would have bored me if you had been worrying. But it was a terrible downpour, wasn't it?"

"Frightful. I never saw one more dreadful. George and Meta and I stayed in here while the worst was going on. I was glad Mr. Houston wasn't here, for he would have been fussing about the tent and other things. The 'Jordan' was a perfect torrent for a while, but it's almost back to normal now."

"And the weir is destroyed?" Isabel spoke tremulously. "How could it be swept away, with those heavy concrete foundations?"

"It wasn't that, exactly," Mrs. Houston explained. "The trouble was what they call an undercut, it seems. The water washed the earth away at

the ends and under the concrete, and unsettled the whole thing."

"Well, but that wasn't the fault of George and Rodney," cried Isabel, who was brushing her hair.

Mrs. Houston looked dubious. "George told me that the Company can 'come back at them' for not selecting a better place."

Isabel paused with her brush in her hand. "That sounds reasonable," she admitted unwillingly.

"He says that the Company have a right to expect their engineers to make a proper selection, as well as to do the work," Mrs. Houston went on.

Isabel sank back in her chair. "Poor boys!" she murmured. "And they were so anxious to succeed!"

Mrs. Houston went on putting things away, without saying any more.

Meta came in with a tray. "I stopped to make tea," she said. "I suppose you're starved, aren't you, Goldilocks?"

"No; and Goldilocks had better hide her tousled tresses under a boudoir cap," smiled Isabel, helping to pull up the table for the tray. She was trying to conceal the misery in her mind, and wondering how she could succeed so well. "Is Rod getting anything to eat?" she asked.

"He's gone to look at the weir," said Meta. "I made him take something in his hand — and the old man, too. It's queer how you 'gaffled onto' him. Is he the Old Man of the Mountains, or the Pied Piper, or anything?"

"Just anything, I think," said Isabel. "He

knows this country well, and he confided to me on the way home that he was counting on 'putting up' in one of the cabins. I tried to say I was sorry we had grabbed them away from him, but he said, 'Never mind. I'm like a fly. I can roost around anywhere.' " She felt too tired to talk, and sick at heart over the misfortune of the young men. But she could not help asking, "How did George find out?"

"He dashed down there just as soon as the storm slackened. He was on needles until he could go. But the damage was done by that time."

"Could anything have been done if they'd both been here?"

"No, I think not. The stream was beyond control."

Isabel felt relieved that Rodney had no special defection with which to reproach himself. She was glad to go to bed early, wearied out with the day's adventures. She rather expected to stay awake and think about the state of things, but before she had indulged in more than one pang of sympathy for the defeated engineers, she was fast asleep.

The next morning, the work on the weir was of necessity suspended. The two young men were out investigating and consulting regarding the damage. They came back for breakfast with the family. They were sober and silent over their bacon and eggs. Matthew Hale, who had shared the tent with them, was voluble in his attempts at consolation.

"There's nothing for it but to begin over again," said Mrs. Houston.

"If the Company is willing to let us do that," sup-

plemented Rodney, trying to speak with coolness; "they may want to put in some one else."

Isabel flushed at the prospect of discharge and humiliation for her friends. She did not dare to look at either Rodney or George. She was thinking, too, that the whole summer would be spoiled. George and Rodney would go, and the others could not stay on when their chief motive for staying had been removed; besides, it would be too humiliating to see some one else take up the work where the two Jefferson men had left it off.

While Isabel was thinking this, Matthew Hale had been speaking. "If they're men of sense," she now heard him say, "they ain't going to fire you" (Isabel winced at the word *fire*; it sounded so much more brutal than *discharge*), "just because you didn't make allowances for something that don't happen once in a dog's age. How was you to know what the blamed little crick was goin' to do?" His leathery hand gripped his coffee cup and held it suspended, half way to his mouth.

"We should have thought of the possibility of its flooding," said Rodney.

"You ain't never had nothin' to do with these here mountains. Tenderfeet like you ain't supposed to know."

George smiled grimly. To call them tenderfeet was to be a Job's comforter. "It's nothing to the Company whether we've been in this country or not," he remarked. "They expect us to produce the goods."

"And you're goin' to produce 'em," the old man said. "It's just as you was sayin' outside — the

best thing to do is to send a telegram as fast as you can to your Company, tellin' 'em the plain truth, and countin' on their havin' some reason in 'em. They'll keep you. Don't you worry."

"I think so, too," said Mrs. Houston decisively.

"Sammis doesn't come up this morning, does he?" said Rodney. "One of us will have to ride down to Martaville."

"I'll go," said George; "and I'll stay and wait for a reply."

"Well, then, I'll try to coddle the Greasers while you're gone," Rodney said resignedly.

In a few minutes, George was on his way. Later in the forenoon, Isabel had a moment's talk with Rodney. The young man's face was almost tragic. "Don't worry so, Rod," Isabel pleaded. "It will come out all right, I am sure."

"No matter what happens, we've lost that much time for the Company," Rodney answered in a bitter tone. "Not a very good thing for them, nor a very good recommendation for us."

"Mistakes will happen," faltered the girl, feeling that she was speaking inanely.

"They shouldn't happen," Rodney corrected her. "Big mining companies don't hire men to make mistakes. By good rights, we ought to be let out, and it's our good luck if we aren't."

"But it would spoil everything," Isabel said, choking.

"Yes, everything." Rodney did not say anything more. After a few minutes' silence, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked away.

Isabel stood looking after him. Presently she saw Matthew Hale come stumbling from the direction of the work-camp, excitedly beckoning to Rodney.

CHAPTER IX

TRAGEDY AND FARCE

RODNEY started running toward Matthew Hale. Isabel followed at a distance. She heard Rodney say, "What is it?" in a voice of apprehension.

Matthew Hale answered hurriedly, "The men are fightin' among themselves. I don't know as anybody can do anything, but I guess we ought to try."

Isabel had a horror of fighting, but she could not resist the impulse to see what was going on. Matthew Hale and Rodney disappeared in the direction of the work-camp, which was hidden from view by the shoulder of the low cliff, across the little ravine.

"I hope, I hope it's nothing bad," Isabel was saying to herself as she jumped across the trickle of water from the spring, and climbed the rocks to a place where she could overlook the camp. She heard a snarling noise issuing from the buildings where the workmen were quartered. Her uppermost thought was one of fear for Rodney: those Mexicans and Italians were so quick with a knife or a pistol! Who knew what they might do in the rashness of their wrath?

Isabel was clasping her hands and breathing hard. "Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she was muttering, unconscious of everything except her terror and the animal-like noises which came to her from the camp.

Now she could see that Matthew Hale and Rodney had rushed up to the group of men — eight or nine, who made up the crew,— surging out from behind the cook-shack, evidently following the struggles of two who were fighting on the ground. As the crowd parted somewhat, Isabel caught a glimpse of the men struggling fiercely. The other workmen looked on, laughing. Evidently they had no intention of parting the two who were affording entertainment on a dull day. Isabel, regardless of what she was doing, clambered down into the path and came closer to the scene of combat. “It certainly is as bad as anything could be!” she said to herself, fervently hoping that Rodney would be sensible and keep out of the *fracas*.

Her eyes wandered for a moment from the moving group, and then she was aware of Quong, the Chinese cook, crouching in the shelter of the cook-shack, and surveying the battle from behind a barrel. The skulking figure of the Chinaman was so expressive of terror that Isabel laughed in spite of her own fears. “Poor Quong!” she whispered. “I know just how he feels.”

She was near enough now to see the details of what went on. The two men on the ground were rolling and writhing, apparently in an attempt to keep or snatch some weapon, though whether it was a knife or a revolver, Isabel could not tell.

Rodney was calling out something to the struggling men, but Isabel could not distinguish his words. With his arms he was vigorously declaiming in the “pumphandle” language. Matthew Hale seconded him with explosive protests. The men on

the ground paid no attention to the outcries around them. The onlookers drew back a little, but turned dark, threatening faces upon those who were interrupting their sport.

Again Rodney called and expostulated. "He might as well save his breath," Isabel murmured. "They're bound to have it out." She was shuddering at what seemed about to happen.

Rodney spoke a word to Matthew Hale; and the two stepped forward to part the fighters. It was a dangerous thing to do. Not only was there a possibility of being wounded by the weapon in the hands of the furious combatants; there was also the risk of being attacked by one or more of the crowd, who resented any interference from a "gringo." Isabel was tense as she watched the process of events.

Rodney leaned over the struggling men, trying to pull the uppermost from the other. Matthew Hale, gaunt but agile, lent his presence to the rescue. There was a confusion of arms and legs and heads, a pushing and hauling and swaying of fighters, rescuers, and lookers-on. Isabel, her heart in her mouth, stood staring as in a dream. She was saying things over to herself, but the only word that she was conscious of was "Rodney!"

There was a mightier scuffle, and then Rodney pulled one of the Mexicans free from the clasp of the other. He dragged the man to his feet, and held him by the arm to steady him, for he was swaying dizzily. In his hand the Mexican held a short ugly knife. Matthew Hale had collared the other fighter, and was restraining him from dashing again at his opponent.

The two combatants glared at each other, panting and grimacing; and then they broke into foolish laughter, and staggered back with gestures of submission. Coming to their senses, they seemed relieved that they had done less damage than they intended.

The girl looking on drew a long breath. Rodney took the knife from his captive, and tossed it to the ground. An evil-looking youth standing by made a motion as if to pick it up. Rodney turned upon him with a fierce snapping word of command, and the youth shrank back sneering but cowed. The other men, moving uneasily among themselves, began to look less savage. One of them flung a word of good-natured ridicule at the man whom Rodney had been holding in restraint; the others took it up, and began chaffing the two who had been thwarted in their encounter.

Rodney and Matthew Hale were talking to the two men in a soothing way, and evidently advising them to wash off the grime of the struggle and make up their differences. One of them walked to the edge of the stream, and splashed water upon his face, disclosing to Isabel the fact that he was none other than Joaquin, the Mexican who had so rashly threatened the life of the "speer-it" in the ravine. He was bruised and slightly cut upon the forehead, but he grinned amiably when the others pointed at his wounds and laughed.

Just then, one of the group, glancing about for another object of interest, caught sight of Quong, peering above the top of the barrel, uncertain whether to come out or not. With a loud laugh the

Mexican directed the attention of his comrades to the quaking Chinaman. They all turned to look for him, but he had dodged behind the barrel. The man who had discovered him now ran to drag him forth. For a minute, Isabel was in horror lest the poor pig-tailed alien might suffer at the hands of the crowd. But she soon saw that they were merely in sport. They hustled Quong about, pretending to threaten him with their fists, and guffawing when they saw him cringe. When he found that they were teasing him, he giggled sheepishly, and attempted to break away from his tormentors.

In the meantime, Rodney had given Joaquin a light slap on the shoulder, as much as to say, "Now it's all over. Go and behave yourself decently."

"The tragedy seems to have degenerated into a farce," said Isabel to herself; and very grateful she was for the farce. It seemed an hour since she had run to the place where she could watch the affray; but she now realized that only a few minutes had passed. She looked toward the "village." No one was in sight, and evidently Mrs. Houston and Meta had heard nothing unusual, and had not come out of the cabins. "Well, I'm glad they're all alive," the girl muttered. "I thought they were going to have a wholesale slaughter."

Quong had by this time shaken himself free, and was tying up the loose end of his pig-tail, which had slipped down from its place around his head. With a disgusted face, he regarded the smears on his white jacket. He marched into his cook-shack with the air of one who can forgive a little rough handling, since he has miraculously escaped with his life. It

was nearing the noon hour, and he would have to hurry with the dinner which was to appease the hungry mob.

The workmen dispersed, and pulling out pipes and tobacco sat down to loaf for the half-hour before the meal. They seemed to be entirely content to simmer lazily in the sun. Whatever differences they had had were smoothed over for the present at least.

Rodney had discovered Isabel, who was just about to flee. He motioned to her, and came up frowning. "Isabel," he said reprovingly, "you shouldn't have watched that affray. It wasn't a pretty sight for a 'perfect lady' like you."

"It was like a moving picture," returned Isabel with a shaky laugh. "I never was more entertained." Then she said nervously, "Oh, Rod! You were awfully rash. They might have killed you!"

"Don't you suppose I know it? You never can tell what those wild men of Borneo are going to do. But I had to take a chance. I couldn't let them kill each other, could I?"

"No — no, of course not," Isabel conceded.

"Even if they'd only wanted to cut one another up a little, I'd have had to interfere," Rodney went on. "I didn't want it said that I wasn't able to hold the men. I couldn't report that, on top of all the rest."

Isabel remembered miserably the nature of "all the rest," which for the moment she had forgotten. She sighed. Then "What was it all about?" she asked.

"The Lord knows. I don't believe those fellows

do, themselves. They just got into a scrap because they hadn't anything else to do. I guess it was a plain case of Satan and idle hands. But they're a volcanic bunch, anyhow."

"I know. I've seen the same kind in Italy. It behooves you to keep them busy, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I'll get them to digging a hole in the ground after dinner, if I can't find anything else for them."

The two young people walked slowly toward the house. "Are you going to come in and eat with us?" Isabel asked.

"No. I think I'll let Quong feed me as usual. I don't want the men to get an idea that I'm skulking."

"As if you'd ever skulk!" cried Isabel indignantly.

Rodney regarded her with an indulgent smile. "I'm pleased to have your confidence, madame," he remarked. "But nobody knows *what* he'll do till he comes to the test."

"Oh, yes. There are some things that 'one' knows he will never do."

"Maybe." The young man's face grew gloomy. "I'm sorry about these messes on Mr. Houston's account. He recommended us, and got us the job, and now we fall down on it. It isn't giving him a square deal."

Isabel winced. She had not thought of Mr. Houston's share in the matter. "You don't need to worry about him," she said at last. "He's so philosophical that he wouldn't bother about it. He's used to ups and downs in business."

"I don't want him to have any downs on my account."

"Well, cheer up, Rod," said Isabel, as her companion was about to turn back toward the work-camp. "It can't be helped now, and the next thing will be better."

"I'll keep a stiff upper lip. Don't alarm our lady friends by a tragic account of the battle. It wasn't much, after all."

"It was enough." Isabel had recovered her spirits and the color in her cheeks. "I'll tell my tale as tamely as possible. The Houstons have pretty good nerves. Don't you think that George ought to be here by this time?"

"Yes, any minute. Well, run on, and we'll await the issue."

Isabel climbed the path to Delmonico's, where Mrs. Houston and Meta were preparing lunch. They stood listening while she swiftly related the story of the brawl and of its harmless outcome.

"Is everything all serene again?" asked Mrs. Houston, taking up the tea-pot.

"Oh, yes; for the time being, they seem all right."

"Is Rodney safe, do you think? Mr. Hale is with him, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's there. The men all seem as lamblike as possible. They saw that Rodney and Mr. Hale weren't afraid of them."

"Then there's nothing to worry about," said Mrs. Houston. "But I'll be glad when George gets back." A tiny line appeared between her eyes.

"Well, I hope he will bring good news," said Meta. There was a troubled look on her face, but

she tried to conceal it by leaning over the bread which she was cutting.

The three women ate their luncheon in silence, and nobody was very hungry. A dull suspense had settled over the camp. They washed the dishes and put the cook-cabin to rights, going often to the door to look down the stream toward the work-camp, which was out of sight behind the cliff.

Isabel had just hung up her apron after everything was done, when she glanced out of the door of the cabin. "Ah-h!" She gave an exclamation of relief and apprehension. "There's George, with Rodney. They're coming up here."

The two others rushed to the door. George and Rodney came slowly toward the village, talking earnestly as they approached.

Isabel took hold of Mrs. Houston's sleeve. "Oh, I hope it's all right," she said in a low voice.

Meta did not say anything. She stood tall and straight, staring at the two young men, with a firm face which showed that she had made up her mind to endure whatever might happen. There was a breathless pause while the engineers ascended the path.

"They'd look gloomier if the news were bad," ventured Isabel.

"I'm sure it's good news," murmured Mrs. Houston.

Just then George looked up and saw the anxious faces at the door. He waved his cap and smiled, throwing back his head with a gesture of contentment.

"It is all right!" the girls exclaimed together.

"Good news?" called Mrs. Houston from the door.

"Fine!" George answered with a ringing voice. He took a yellow telegraph slip from his pocket.

"Hooray!" Isabel waved her handkerchief.

The young men came up, looking happy and yet serious. "Well, we've got another chance," said George. His blue eyes were clear and shining. "See, it says here, *Wire received. Start again.*"

"Is that all?" asked Isabel. She had rather expected more of either encouragement or rebuke. She looked at the slip as if it might have something concealed behind it.

"Yes, that's all. It's what we wanted." George put the slip away.

"That's volumes," said Rodney. "Now we're going to start in again, and we know more than we did before — paying high enough for the information. We'll select a place that the Mississippi and the Amazon combined couldn't make any impression on, if it rained for a year. We *can't* be wrong this time: it's a wood-chuck case."

"Rod's got it all doped out," said George. "There's nothing for me to say. I guess I'll go back and get Quong to cook me a dinner. I didn't stop to get anything in Martaville."

"I was too much excited to ask whether you'd had anything," said Mrs. Houston. "Stay here and we'll get you something. I can't tell you how glad I am that things have come out so well."

"Thanks, kind lady. We're indebted to our friends for a lot of encouragement," answered George. "And, oh, by the way, I brought some

letters. Of course they were of secondary importance, compared to my own affairs!" He brought out a sheaf of letters and passed them about. Mrs. Houston took hers and disappeared into Delmonico's. The girls lingered a minute, before they went to help with George's lunch.

Meta's eyes met George's with a glow of satisfaction and understanding. She had been more eager for his success than she had dared to say. What she said now was merely conventional: "It did seem dreadful to think that our whole village might be broken up. We should have cried our eyes out."

"It's a tremendous relief to us," confessed Rodney. "Of course, we don't feel any too much set up as it is. We haven't covered ourselves with glory. But we have tried to do the right thing, and we sure have learned a lot."

"We'll never be the same again," laughed George.

"I'll go back and see how things are down below," said Rodney. "Mr. Hale is one good old guy to hang around there and keep the men diverted."

A subdued gayety was restored to the village. The immediate strain of uncertainty was over. There was still the task of choosing a new place for the weir. After minute investigation the young men selected a spot somewhat farther down the stream, and prepared to begin their labors over again.

"I feel certain that we aren't making any mistake this time," Rodney confided to Isabel the next day. "I'm not a bit worried, though possibly I ought to be."

"Of course you shouldn't if you know you're right," said Isabel. "You make me think of that Norwegian woman that mother had to help her a year or so ago, when Olga was on her vacation. This woman had left one of her children in Norway, and then had it sent over all alone, in care of the captain and the conductor. Mother said to her, 'Weren't you worried when you knew that the child was taking that long journey alone?' And the woman said, 'Well, Missis, my husband got sick just then, and I had to take care of him, so I couldn't worry *as much as I wanted to!*'"

Rodney laughed. "I guess that's the way with me. Anyhow, I feel pretty happy in spite of everything."

"I'm so glad," Isabel replied. "And now we can make the most of our camp life while we're here."

"Yes. But I was in hopes that you'd get a chance to see some ranch life, too. I don't see exactly how you're going to do it."

"Mrs. Houston said that when we went back to Helena, they might have a chance to take me out from there for a few days."

"Do you think you'll go to Seattle with them?"

"I suppose so, though they don't know themselves where they're going to stay; that is, they haven't taken a house yet. But they say I'm to go anyway, because they have to stay somewhere, and I might as well be with them. I suppose I'll be getting anxious to go home, before long, in spite of the good time that I'm having."

Matthew Hale grew restless after a day or two, and started out on his endless quest.

Then Mr. Houston came back unexpectedly, one noon. He had had a swift and busy trip to Butte and Anaconda. The evening after his arrival when the family were gathered in the tent, he heard the story of the "undercut" weir and the rampant Mexicans. He listened with a tolerant smile.

"It was a pretty disagreeable experience for you two young fellows," he said; "but those things are the sort that a company takes and makes the best of. Why, I knew of a case in Pennsylvania (not the mysterious mountains of the Far West), where a huge dam was built at enormous expense by seasoned engineers, and the same thing happened — bad location, undercut, and everything. Mind you, I'm not saying that you shouldn't have been more exact, and that you shouldn't have made a better choice; but no one can blame you if you didn't."

"We blame ourselves," said George quickly.

"Bad thing to do," answered Mr. Houston. "That's one thing I've never done in my business. If I make a blunder — and I make lots of them — I learn what I can from it, keep still about it, and forget it as soon as possible. And so the Mexicans got to scrapping, did they? Do any damage?"

"Not a bit, except to scratch up that fellow Joaquin a bit," said Rodney.

"I'm glad of that. It would have been awkward to have anything worse. Up in one of the other camps last year, Chelford told me, the Mexican hands suddenly got riotous because the *frijoles* didn't have enough pepper in them, or the *chile con carne*

enough *chile*, or something of that sort; anyhow, the cooking wasn't what they were used to, and they did raise particular Cain after they got started — banged the Chinamen up, and laid out two of their own bunch so that they had to be taken to the hospital, and I don't know what all. So you see you came off rather easy."

"It would have been much worse if Rod hadn't dashed into the middle of things and changed the course of events," spoke up Isabel.

"He ran a big risk," said Mr. Houston, frowning. "I wouldn't advise any one to do that."

"Fools rush in, I suppose," said Rodney. "I didn't see anything else to do, and I'm still glad that I did it."

"Well, yes, as long as you came out all right," remarked Mr. Houston, "which I'm very glad you did."

Isabel could see that the younger men had been dreading Mr. Houston's comment on their comparative failure, and that they now felt relieved that he had taken the story so generously. It was true, as she had said, that he had had so many ups and downs in his long business experience that he was inclined to view incidents and accidents with philosophy. She remembered what he had said at the Wing House in Helena, — "It will do them good to figure and sweat a little." And glancing over at the thoughtful faces of the engineers, Isabel decided that figuring and sweating *was* doing them good.

CHAPTER X

SAVING DIANA

WITH the new beginning, affairs at "Houston Village" reverted to their old routine, and the cheerful life of the villagers went on as before. There were rides and trips here and there among the mountains. The Hurds came and went, on several occasions. Once they brought the news that the bear, "Jof-fer," had been shot by a new workman at the mines. The man had been much excited over his brave deed, and had imagined he was rescuing the mining-location from imminent peril of attack, and he felt foolish when he discovered that the bear was a "near-pet."

Mrs. Houston and Isabel whispered to each other with small regret over Joffre's passing. "I've never felt quite easy on any of our trips," said Isabel. "I always had the feeling that he'd be at every turn of the road."

"I, too," confessed Mrs. Houston. "He was a real bug-bear to me. Is that the proper word?"

Isabel giggled, and then looked sober. "It's too bad he couldn't have been content to stay off up in the remote regions, where he ought to have been, and so prolonged his life," she remarked.

"I never liked the idea of his being around where

Rose and Freddy were," said Mrs. Houston. "And Mrs. Hurd didn't like it, either."

"Well, we don't have to worry about that any more," Isabel responded. "And I for one am much relieved."

One profitable diversion of the family was to pick the great red raspberries which were beginning to ripen in quantities on certain hillsides. Old gloves saved tender fingers from too much scratching, and thick clothing resisted savage branches without too many rents. Mr. Sammis was commissioned to buy some sun-bonnets at Martaville, so that the three women might gather the fruit without apprehension over sunburned necks. Huge shortcakes, dribbling juice, appeared on the supper table almost every day; and Mrs. Houston could not refrain from "putting up" innumerable tumblers of raspberry jam.

"It's so delicious — better than any we could buy," she said, "and we shall so enjoy it in the winter."

"But, Alice," her husband protested, "I hate to have you hanging over the stove all the afternoon. I don't so much mind your staying out in the fresh air picking the berries, if you think you want to, but do let the jam go by the board."

"It doesn't hurt me a bit to brew up a kettleful of jam, Gilbert," the lady answered, her cheeks red from her endeavors. "The only thing that worries me is being argued with about it."

"Well, then, I suppose you'll have to have your way," Mr. Houston answered reluctantly, as he went back to his typewriter.

"The fact is that you love doing it. Isn't that

so?" said Isabel, when Mr. Houston was out of hearing.

Mrs. Houston looked almost guilty. "I do, more than I dare admit," she rejoined. "I'm an incorrigible housewife at heart. I like to plan and carry out some detail that will improve my school; and I like to go into good society and wear pretty clothes and hear clever talk; and then I like to bake a luscious cake, or make a dozen jars of nice jam. Every one of those things gives me equal pleasure."

"I don't see why you shouldn't do all of them, then," said Isabel sympathetically.

"If one's mind is active, she ought to do all sorts of different things, and take delight in them, I think," Mrs. Houston concluded.

Isabel, during the weeks in camp, had been progressing with her own work. She had her simpler tools at hand, and had made some attractive bits of jewelry, with inexpensive settings. Once or twice she had sighed at the remembrance of the Montana sapphires which she had thought she could not afford; but she did not take much time for repining.

Meta had read all of her books about the stage, and had sent for more. Mrs. Houston had knitted many socks, and read her big educational books from cover to cover. "We are really accomplishing something," the women told one another from time to time. They were happy not to be mere idlers and pleasure-seekers.

In spite of the fact that the young men were working hard, they found time for a good deal of

fraternizing with the rest of the group. The long twilight afforded opportunity for picnics and short excursions; and the evenings in the tent or out of doors offered varied forms of rest or diversion. It was the custom of the party to illuminate the hour before bed-time by building a camp-fire around which all might gather, sometimes silent, or sometimes bursting into songs and laughter.

These fires at night were a source of the keenest joy to Isabel. She loved even the scouring of the vicinity for wood with which to kindle them. The creek, at times when it had been swollen, had tossed up flotsam all along the shores, and these bits of wood and even larger logs were dry and crisp with the clear weather. A heap of them would be reared toward nightfall, supplemented by packing boxes, waste paper, and pine twigs. Pine cones gathered on all expeditions, or nearly all, served for the choicest offerings to the glory of the fire.

From the moment when the match was struck and applied to the careful arrangement of paper and kindling, to the time when the last yellow coals faded into darkness, Isabel felt an exaltation which came of a primitive delight in the color and glow. She delighted in the leaping and falling of the flame, now lighting up the slopes around, and now leaving even the faces of the onlookers in gloom. The pictures which came and went were masterpieces of light and shadow: Meta in a crimson sweater against a curtain of black; Mrs. Houston with her hair glinting above a pink wadded Chinese jacket and a blue gown; Mr. Houston looking like a Spanish *hidalgo*,

with his dark mustache and keen eyes, and a diamond flashing when he moved his hand.

One afternoon Isabel sat by herself in the Ritz and composed a poem which seemed to her quite a thrilling bit of literature while she was writing it; but which sounded extremely flat to her when it was finished. She had thought of declaiming it at night, when the villagers were grouped around the fire; but in the end she merely showed it privately to Rodney, who "could stand almost anything," as he teasingly assured her.

"I thought it was going to be good enough to send to the *Lit*," she confided to him when she was taking a stroll with him after supper; "but now I have a sinking feeling that it isn't. It sort of peters out at the end, and some of the lines are lumbering."

"Oh, you've got the academic spirit of fussiness," said Rodney. "People who have stayed around a college for a while get so critical that they can't do anything with any life in it. All they can do is to sit paralyzed like the centipede in the ditch 'considering how to run.' Let's see this lumbering effusion with its petering conclusion. There! I've made a pretty good poem myself without intending to. Who knows what I could do if I tried?" He laughed as he reached for the slip of paper which Isabel held hesitatingly toward him.

Rodney glanced down the lines. "They look good to me," he said, "but why not read them to me? Then I could get the full effect."

"I'm afraid the full effect isn't very impressive," said Isabel modestly. "But here goes." They stood still in the path while she read:

A MOUNTAIN CAMP

Straight overhead with black and jagged lines
The cliffs cut sharp against the darkened sky,
Sparse-diamonded with stars; tall spectral pines
Surround our camp and stand grim-watchful by.

The stream impetuous-footed rushes past
With ever-changing hail-and-farewell call,
Its faint halloo reëchoing, backward cast,
From where it leaps in some brave waterfall.

From out the gloomy silences around,
Uncanny sighs and murmurs seem to float,
While human-sad, with shrill pathetic sound,
The lorn coyote lifts his doleful note.

Stark loneliness creeps down the mountain trails
With stealthy step, yet dares not come a-near;
For where our yellow camp-fire glows and pales
Are food and warmth and song and all good cheer.

"Why, you know, I don't think that's a bit bad," said Rodney when she had finished. "It's clear, and it has some swing to it. Of course you haven't adhered strictly to facts."

"Oh, no," said Isabel earnestly; "that's the beauty of writing in verse,—you don't have to stick to facts. You embellish them to suit yourself."

"There are times when one would wish to give an account of his own performances in verse," said Rodney; "and embellish them to suit himself. But anyhow, I'd send this to the *Lit* if I were you. Perhaps you can touch it up a trifle, after it gets cold."

"Yes, I mean to," answered Isabel, folding the slip of paper into small squares.

Rodney took it from her again, and looked it over. "I think there's something in it," he said, "and I couldn't do anything one-sixteenth as good. I should say, if you ask me, that if it has any faults, it's because there are too many adjectives."

"I thought of that." Isabel flushed uncomfortably; "but I didn't know what to do. I had to fill out just so many feet, you know."

"Yes, I know. That's the Dickens of this poetry business. But why don't you try the new free verse? That looks as if you just chopped off a line where you felt like it, and stuck the rest of it on somewhere else. It looks as easy as huckleberry pie."

"Herbert Barry says it's just as hard as the other kind, if it's done well," meditated Isabel. They had renewed their walk along the bank of the stream. "I've never dared to try it, but I may some day, when I get rash."

"Yes, do. And I think it's good for anybody to do things like that — write poetry, and try different forms of expression. It doesn't make such a terrific lot of difference what the result is; it's the activity that counts. Don't you think so?"

"That's what father's always preaching," Isabel replied with a reminiscent smile. "You know he's always haranguing us about expressing our real selves, and we tease him by telling him that his middle name is Self-Expression."

"I'd just as lief have that for a middle name. And your father is a first-class trump, if you will permit me to say so."

"He's a dear, and I wish I could see him this minute," said Isabel, whose thoughts took a sud-

den leap back to Jefferson, as they had a way of doing.

Rodney did not say anything satirical about her not being pleased with her present society. He kept still, letting her follow her own dreams. And Isabel, after her pang of homesickness was gone, resolved to write more verse, even if it should turn out to be activity and nothing more; and she would show it to her father as a souvenir of her summer in the West.

Nothing of very great importance had happened for some time, but an event was now to take place which was to make a real difference in several persons' lives. The event was near, but the consequences were still a long way off.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, and Meta and Isabel and Rodney had gone for a long ride over toward Confederate Gulch. Isabel had become fairly well accustomed to riding, and only occasionally suffered from panic. Riding did not tire her so much as it had done at first, and she was able to enjoy the scenery and give attention to her horse at the same time. Meta was a skilled horsewoman, and seemed to have no fear of any contingency which might arise.

On this specific afternoon, they had mounted higher and higher into the clear air, stopping now and then to rest their horses, since the climb was hard. They could see the dark tops of the pines far below, and the glint of a stream among the shadows. Here and there a waterfall, slender and silent, leaped down the side of the gorge, and disappeared among the trees.

The clouds which billowed across the sky were for the most part white and foamy; but presently one sailed over them which had a grayer tinge, and before it melted, it had sent forth a swift gush of rain. The three riders dismounted and huddled against the rocks until the cloud had passed over. The shower lasted only a few minutes; but when the travelers set out again, they found the hard stone road somewhat perilous because of the recent down-pour.

"This road is awfully slippery, since the rain fell," said Rodney, after they had gone a few steps.

"Oh, well, it will soon dry out," called Meta, who was riding in front of the others.

"Yes, but in the meantime it isn't any too safe."

"One has to be careful," Meta conceded, "and look out where he's going."

Rodney looked dubious. "Now, Isabel," he said, "I don't want to cast any reflections on your riding — you know I don't consider myself a Buffalo Bill — but —"

"We-ell," hesitated Isabel, "to put it plainly, you'd feel happier if I'd ride on Shank's horses?"

"Just over this narrow part," admitted Rodney with relief. "It's so high, and the road is a mere shelf, if you stop to look at it. I believe you'd better."

Isabel pulled her horse up on the narrow road which led around the cliff of red and yellow sandstone. "All right, Rod," she said amiably. "I'm not really afraid, but it is a trifle 'skeery,' and I'll get down if you think it's wiser. But it isn't half as much fun."

"I'll walk, too, you know," answered the young man quickly, "and lead the two horses."

"The road is too narrow for that," said Meta, twisting in her saddle. "Diana doesn't need any leading. She'll follow along like a collie dog. And there's nothing to be afraid of." Meta turned back, riding on with her superb air of ease and control which Isabel always secretly envied.

With Rodney's help, Isabel dismounted; she loosed her hold on the reins, and walked beside Rodney, who was leading his own horse. Diana followed, stepping cautiously and looking a bit annoyed when her foot slipped on the wet road.

As the group went on, talking aimlessly about the trail and the gulch below, they heard the rattle of hoofs at a distance; and then they caught a glimpse of a horse and rider on the road before them, below the level on which they were proceeding.

"Ha! a fellow-traveler," commented Rodney. "Friend or foe?"

"He doesn't look dangerous," said Isabel. "Do you think he'll demand our money or our life?"

"It makes me think of the not-too-bright young man who was telling how he had been attacked by footpads," answered Rodney. "'They came up behind me with their revolvers,' said he, 'and shouted, 'Your money or your brains!' and by Jove, I had nothing for them!'"

Isabel laughed. She could now see the rider on the dark horse, and perceived that he looked harmless. He had fair hair, under a wide-brimmed hat, and he wore the simple clothes of the ranchman.

He sat his horse with the ease of one used to riding.

The trio urged their horses up against the side of the cliff, that the stranger might have room to pass. Diana moved uneasily and neighed at the horse on which the ranchman rode. This ranchman was young, not more than eighteen, with blue eyes and fresh red cheeks. A lariat of braided leather hung at the side of his carved Mexican saddle, a fine one darkened by use, but trim and picturesque.

He raised his hat shyly as he went by, and Rodney responded by lifting his hand in a salute. "What a nice boy!" thought Isabel. "I wonder where he lives?" Her eyes followed him as he went on along the narrow trail.

"Did you notice that saddle?" asked Rodney in a low voice. "That was a cracker-jack, wasn't it, Meta?"

"It was a good one," Meta assented. "It had some handsome carving on it."

Still talking, they swung their horses out of the space next the cliff. Meta rode forward, and the other horses backed away to give her room. Diana made a lunge on the slippery road; then lunged again with a snort and clatter. Turning, Rodney and Isabel were horrified to see that the horse was half over the edge of the ledge. She was transfixed, her eyes red with terror.

Isabel screamed, and Meta pulled up her horse to look back. Diana hung with her front hoofs on the road, and her hind feet on a tiny shelf of rock below. She could not draw herself up to the road again, but swayed quivering on the brink of the abyss, holding precariously to life.

"Oh, what shall we do?" moaned Isabel. She and Rodney both stood helpless.

Then Rodney reached for Diana's bridle. "Look out!" shouted Meta. "She'll pull you over." Rodney stepped back, for he knew that the warning was well given.

"Oh, but we can't let her go down!" Isabel was wringing her hands.

Rodney put his hands impulsively to his mouth and gave a loud *whoo-hoo!*

The young ranchman who had just passed appeared suddenly again around a turn of the road. His eyes took in the situation, the paralyzed onlookers, and the horse trembling on the edge of the precipice, her terror making an almost human appeal to those who stood by.

"Don't move," said the stranger in a quiet voice. He took the stout leather lariat from the horn of his saddle and swung himself down. Cautiously he went forward and looped the rope around the shoulders of the shaking horse. "Steady, steady," he was saying under his breath, "steady now." The horse seemed to respond and take new courage. The ranchman took the other end of the lariat and twisted it around a projection of the solid rock. The others stood watching him breathlessly. He kept the rope lightly held in his hands, ready to drop it if the horse fell, so that he might not be dragged off his feet himself. Now he made the lariat fast about the shoulders of his own horse, and began backing him carefully along the side of the cliff as far from the edge as possible.

The rope grew taut as it tightened around the

rock, and gradually made itself felt as a support to the despairing Diana. She breathed harder, quivered, and then with one supreme effort, trusting to the sustaining force of the lariat, she leaped forward, and stood with all four feet on the road. A gasp of relief sounded from the three young people looking on. Isabel found that tears were running down her cheeks.

The strange boy went up to the horse and patted her on the shoulder, murmuring soothing words. "A close call," he was saying, "but don't be scared now. We made it."

Rodney came forward, his face glowing with admiration and joy. "That was a splendid piece of work!" he cried. "It was great! But you certainly took some chances yourself."

"Oh, not much." The boy was shy and modest again. "I saw that sort of thing done once before, in a tight place."

Meta was now off her horse and adding her voice to the chorus of thanks. "You did that wonderfully," she said. "The slightest false move would have been fatal."

"The horse helped," said the boy, "by knowing enough to keep still. Horses are just like persons to me. I can't bear to see one suffer, and I always count on their knowing at least as much as I do." He had a diffident air, and he seemed in a hurry to get away from the praise of the others. He now prepared to mount his own horse again. Isabel, alternately wiping her eyes and stroking Diana's neck, was hoping that the new boy would stay on until they knew more about him.

"Don't go yet," said Rodney. "We're tremendously indebted to you. I don't know what we can do to show our gratitude, but at least we'd like a chance to say *thank you* once or twice more."

The boy flushed. "Oh, that's all right," he answered. "Anybody would do that much." But he hesitated. Isabel thought that he looked wistfully at the group of friends. It occurred to her that perhaps he was as much in need of their company as they had been of his.

"Are you in a hurry?" she asked.

"No, not really," he replied. "I was just getting home from White Sulphur Springs."

"Well, let's exchange names anyhow," said Rodney. "I'm Rodney Fox."

"And I'm Steve Clark," said the lad. He and Rodney shook hands almost solemnly.

"I'm Meta Houston," said the Western girl; "and this is Isabel Carleton, a tenderfoot."

They all laughed a little, glad that the tension had been relaxed.

"Mr. Fox and I come from the Middle West," said Isabel, "but Miss Houston here puts on airs because she belongs in Montana. Won't you tell us where you live?"

"Oh, a ranch over that way about ten miles," said Stephen Clark. "It isn't very far."

Isabel had an inspiration. "We always take some lunch with us when we go on one of these trips," she said, "because we may be late in getting back. Won't you stay a while and have a picnic with us?"

"Yes, do!" said Meta in her energetic way.

Stephen looked bashfully at the others. "Why, I'd like to," he said. "But I have a sandwich or two with me, and I don't need to take yours."

"We have bushels," said Isabel, who frequently spoke in hyperbole. "At least we have a lot. You'll stay, won't you?"

"Yes, I'd be glad to." The boy was more at his ease. "There's a place down below here, where there's more room, and we can spread out a little."

They moved on down the road, leading the horses, and came to a spot where the trail was wider, and several rough pine trees with roots almost bare found a sufficient hold in the sandstone. The travelers left their horses with the bridle reins hanging, as is the custom in the West, and the patient creatures stood waiting with their heads down. Diana had almost recovered from her shock, but she edged carefully against the wall and quivered nervously now and then.

There were sandwiches and thermos bottles strapped in parcels against the saddles of the villagers. While the food was being unwrapped, Rodney explained to Stephen about the weir and the friends who were camping in the valley while the work was going on. "Ever been over there?" he asked.

"Once, near there. My father and I went there to fish, and we took a trip up to the Big Indian mine, while we were that near. Isn't that where it is — down the second valley from the Big Indian?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Tell us about your ranch," said Isabel eagerly.

"It isn't a very big one," said Stephen, as if he wanted them to be sure not to rate it too high.

"What do you raise on it?" asked Meta practically. "Sheep?"

"No; horses."

"They must be awfully interesting," said Isabel, thinking at the same time that her remark was rather silly.

But the boy's face brightened. "I should say they are," he answered. "I don't suppose there's anything more interesting in the world."

The lunch was now ready, and they all sat around cross-legged on the rocks to eat their sandwiches. Stephen produced two from the pocket of his coat which was laid across his saddle. The bread was particularly light and white, and Isabel could not help remarking it.

"My mother's a good cook," said Stephen Clark simply.

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?" asked Meta.

"In other words, 'Are there any more at home like you?'" supplemented Rodney.

"No, I'm the only one. I get all there is going," Stephen replied, grinning.

"But you haven't told us about the ranch," persisted Isabel.

"She's never seen a ranch," put in Meta, as if she were explaining the behavior of a half-witted person.

"Oh, haven't you?" Stephen looked up quickly. "That's funny. But say," he added, after a mo-

ment, "why can't you people come over and see the ranch some day? There isn't such a lot to see," he apologized; "but maybe Miss — Miss —"

"Carleton," said Isabel.

"Miss Carleton would like it," finished Stephen, for whom conversation was still something of an effort.

"Maybe we could arrange it," said Meta, taking a sandwich. Isabel had looked toward her, as to a hostess. "Maybe we could stay around several days. Do you know of any one who would take us in — that we could board with, you know, for a little while?"

"Why, yes," said Stephen. "I think there might be."

"You know father wants to take mother to Seattle next week," said Meta, turning to Isabel. "He's got to go, and wants her to go along. It would simplify the whole thing if we came over to the ranch country and stayed while they are gone. Otherwise, mother wouldn't feel that she could go, of course."

"Oh, it would be beautiful," cried Isabel. "And everybody would be pleased, all around."

"Now if Mr. Clark —" Meta began.

"Call me Stephen," said the boy. "I'm not used to being *Mr. Clarked*."

"Well, if you know of a place, we could tell our people about it when we get back to camp. Father always lets me do things like that if I want to."

"There's Mrs. Rader," said Stephen. "Her son Charlie's married, and Susie's visiting her relatives in Oregon, and Mrs. Rader is sort of lonesome. I believe she'd take you. The Raders are nice folks

— not educated, you know, but fine people just the same.”

“ Oh, say,” exclaimed Rodney, “ we know better than to judge people by what’s inside of books.”

“ I kind of thought so,” assented Stephen.

“ Won’t you have some of this cake?” asked Isabel. “ I made it, so I know it’s good,” she added jokingly.

“ I can’t resist it.” Stephen took a piece of the cake, and went on speaking. “ The Raders don’t live very far from where we do.”

“ How are we going to find out whether she’ll take us?” asked Isabel anxiously. She intended to follow up the plan until she really made a visit to a ranch.

Steve considered. “ I don’t know that it’s necessary to find out. I think she’ll take you. You can just ride over and tell her that you’ve come to stay. I’ll warn her, you know.”

“ That seems rather brazen,” commented Isabel.

“ Oh, no, it isn’t,” Stephen replied. “ And you can send your things over by stage. Send ’em to Helena, and then they’ll go from there. It’ll take a day or two.”

“ I think Mrs. Rader will keep us,” said Meta, who knew the ways of Westerners.

“ Of course she will,” asserted the lad; “ and if she didn’t, you could stay at our house — only we haven’t much room.”

“ Your mother might not like to see two strange girls come riding up to her door, asking to be taken in,” Isabel remarked.

“ Oh, we have all sorts of queer people riding up

to the door," said Stephen; and then he colored violently at the thought of what he had said.

"Even strange college girls," said Isabel amid the general hilarity.

"No, not many of those," answered the boy, recovering himself. "But you know the stage brings lots of people back and forth. Sometimes we have to take 'em in."

After a little more talk, and some planning of details, Stephen declared that he must be "trekking." The lunch was finished, and the others rose when he did. Rodney mentioned the saddle which had excited his admiration.

"It is a good one," Stephen admitted with a pleased glance. "It was given to me by a man named Reynolds — he has a ranch in Wyoming, and makes a lot of money. I couldn't afford an expensive saddle like that, but he wanted to give it to me. He used to be at our house when I was a little shaver."

"Lucky chap to have such a saddle. Well, now, we're a thousand times obliged to you for what you've done. If it hadn't been for you, we'd have lost Diana, sure enough." Rodney's voice was heartily grateful.

"She's good for a hundred years yet." Stephen laid his hand caressingly on the horse's neck. "You couldn't afford to lose a nice horse like that."

"You'll come and see us, won't you?" said Rodney.

"Sure. But the ladies are coming over to our place first. So I'll see you next week?" he queried of Meta and Isabel.

"You may count on us," returned Meta.

"Good. Well, so long. Awfully glad I met you." The boy's shyness had come back. He lifted his hat awkwardly, and rode away.

"He's nice, isn't he?" said Isabel, as the three turned to their horses. She was thinking to herself, "Somehow, I feel that we're going to see a good deal of Stephen Clark, from now on."

"Fine kid," agreed Rodney, who felt years older than Stephen. "And he helped us out in a perilous moment. Well, shall we go on?"

"The trail's dried now," said Meta. "Are you all right, Isabel? You aren't afraid, are you?"

"I'll walk a bit farther till we get past the scary places." Isabel had a qualm or two when she thought of the precipitous edges of the road.

She and Rodney walked on behind Meta. "It's interesting, that sort of thing, isn't it?" Isabel said: "Meeting people by chance, and then getting to know them afterward. Sometimes it makes a real difference in people's lives."

"Which proves, I suppose, that there isn't any chance about it after all," Rodney responded thoughtfully. "There seems to be a law that rules such things, if one could only find out what it is."

"I expect to find out sometime," said Isabel. "Somebody must know, and I don't know why I shouldn't."

"It's worth looking into;" Rodney smiled at his companion, as they went on down the narrow mountain path.

CHAPTER XI

RANCH COUNTRY

MR. AND MRS. HOUSTON were pleased with the plan for visiting the ranches. The arrangement was soon made. Mr. Houston was to ride over with the girls, and then come back and take the trip to Seattle with Mrs. Houston.

On Monday morning the trio started out. Mr. Sammis was taking the suitcases to Martaville, where they were to be sent by express to Helena, and thence by stage to the ranch. Each of the travelers had a small parcel of necessities at the back of the saddle. Meta had a riding skirt of her own, and Isabel was induced to borrow Mrs. Houston's.

Mrs. Houston kissed the girls, saying, "Good-by. Be good girls, and don't get rash."

"We will, and we won't," laughed Isabel.

"Don't worry about us," admonished Meta.

The young men were already at work, at the new weir, when the riders went by on their way down the valley. George and Rodney waved their hats and called farewells and good wishes.

It was a bright morning, and to Isabel it seemed as if the mountain world were fresher and more lovely than ever before. The group rode almost in silence, in single file. But now and then they called out remarks to one another when something espe-

cially interesting came into sight. They had planned to take the trip slowly, on Isabel's account. Several times Mr. Houston insisted on her getting down and resting her muscles, while he walked beside her; and they all ate chocolate almond bars, which were always appearing mysteriously when Mr. Houston was about.

They stopped at Diamond City, a tiny group of buildings in a deep gulch, for their early dinner, and Isabel was grateful for the relaxation and the hot food. The afternoon seemed long, in spite of the varied scenery. They were now getting down into the foot-hills, where long rolling spaces alternated with high craggy cliffs. Isabel was in ecstasies over the flowers. Sometimes she was riding through great patches of purple larkspur which filled a dip among the hills, and sometimes she could look down and see the sandy soil covered with the delicate pink of the bitter-root blossoms, growing close to the ground. At other times, as far as she could see, the plain would be glowing with the bright crimson flowers of the prickly-pear cactus, which thrust up its savage thorny leaves from the caked and crackling earth. She ceased after a while to exclaim as new beauties rose to her sight. But she was never satiated, though she grew more and more weary with her journey.

"Can you hold out?" asked Mr. Houston anxiously, riding up at her side.

"Oh, surely. And we're almost there now, aren't we?" said Isabel.

"That's Fort Logan over there, I think." They were nearing a deserted group of buildings arranged

around a grass-grown plaza. The doors swung on their hinges, and the windows gaped without glass. In the distance, a half dozen horses were grazing on the top of a long low hill.

"Some one is coming, over that way," said Meta. She pointed with her quirt to a horseman just appearing above the bench-land. He was riding easily, and his steed was loping pleasantly along.

"Probably he can tell us which is the Rader ranch," Mr. Houston remarked.

Then Isabel noted the fair hair of the rider, under the wide-brimmed hat. "Oh, it's Stephen Clark!" she cried.

Stephen waved his hat as he came near. "Hello!" he called happily to the three.

"Where did you come from?" asked Meta as he rode up.

"I'm the committee of welcome," said he. "I thought you'd be wandering in, just about now, and I rode out to meet you."

"That was fine." Mr. Houston had never seen the boy before, but he fell at once into the easy friendliness of the ranches. "What's the Deserted Village over here?" he asked. "Is that Fort Logan?"

"Yes," answered Stephen, "that used to be a government fort, years ago, when the Indians were bad; but it's been deserted for a long time."

"It looks romantic," said Isabel. After the first greetings, Stephen had swung into place beside her.

"When I was a little kid, I had a romantic adventure there with some desperadoes." The boy's blue eyes were dancing at the remembrance.

"You must tell me about it."

"I will, when there's a chance. There! that's the Rader ranch." He indicated a group of low buildings in the distance.

"Where is yours?" asked Meta.

"Over beyond the bench. You can't see it. Those foot-hills on the other side slope right down to it. There's a crick in there." His face lighted up, and he was speaking eagerly, as if the ranch in the bottom-land meant more to him than he could tell.

"We'll see it this evening, or in the morning," said Meta. Isabel groaned inwardly at the thought of another moment on horseback.

They went on, talking among themselves, and rode up to the door of the Raders' ranch-house, a low log structure, with a clapboarded addition, oddly out of keeping with the rest.

A thin kindly woman came to the door, wearing a dark print dress and a gingham apron. She was shading her eyes from the sun as the party came on.

"Hello, Mrs. Rader! I brought 'em," called Steve.

"Well, you did, sure enough, Steve," returned the woman. "You're a man of your word."

"They simply couldn't stay away, after what I told them about you," the boy teased her.

"Oh, go on, Stevie." Mrs. Rader turned smilingly to the young ladies, and Stephen performed the introductions stammeringly.

"This is Miss — Miss Houston; and Miss Carleton. And this is Mr. Houston."

"You're going to take us in, aren't you?" asked Isabel with almost a quiver in her voice.

"Isabel is tired enough to fall off her horse," said Meta. "She isn't used to riding."

"We don't want to impose upon you," broke in Mr. Houston with his urbane air, "but we'd really like to have you put us up, if you can."

"Why, yes, of course I can. I'd be delighted. I kind of half-promised Steve that I would, anyway; but I was doubtful about your coming. I thought he was only making up a yarn." Mrs. Rader looked over affectionately at the boy. "Jump down, jump down, all of you."

"We don't need any further invitation," murmured Isabel.

They were soon down, and the two men were taking the horses around to the stable. The girls walked into the sitting-room, Isabel stumbling with weariness.

"You are tired," said Mrs. Rader, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "You shall have a cup o' tea, and lie down before supper." She hurried away to the kitchen.

The room in which the girls sat was a comfortable one, with a queer mixture of the rough and the expensive. There were sheepskin mats on a good Axminster rug; calico curtains and a velvet Morris chair; a handsome lamp on a pine table covered with a faded cotton spread. The general effect was naïve and homey. "I like it," said Isabel, and Meta nodded understandingly.

After the strong green tea and the spice-cake which Mrs. Rader brought, Isabel was glad to see

the room which she was to have — the one which belonged to the absent Susie. It was a snug, small place, with a comfortable white bed, an oak dresser, a writing table, and a chair.

Chatting in a friendly way, Mrs. Rader turned back the spread, and then left the girl to her hour of rest. Isabel did not sleep, but lay listening to the subdued noises around the house,— the men's voices in the yard, and the low tones of Meta and Mrs. Rader, the rattle of dishes in the kitchen. She emerged from her room much refreshed when the call came for supper.

"I asked Steve to stay for supper," said Mrs. Rader at Isabel's door. And then she added in a lower tone, "He doesn't really belong to the Clarks, you know. I thought I'd tell you, so as to prevent any misunderstanding."

Isabel opened her eyes wide. "Oh! Doesn't he?" she asked curiously.

"No, he's adopted," Mrs. Rader answered hurriedly. "They found him on the street one time when they went up to Helena for an outing."

"How strange!" Isabel was readjusting her thoughts about Stephen. "But I suppose they liked him and took him for their own."

"Yes. Emery's that kind; his heart's big enough to take in all the stray boys in the State."

They walked through the sitting-room, and at the kitchen door saw Stephen coming in shyly with Mr. Houston. Mr. Rader and the hired man followed, and after the brief introductions which the situation demanded, the whole party sat down at the long table in the room which was kitchen and dining-room com-

bined. Isabel loved it all — the simplicity and friendliness of it, the kindly talk, the quick assumption of equality. She looked over at Meta, to see whether that young lady were having her dignity injured by the kitchen and the hired man. But the Western girl was thoroughly at home. She had so frequently been a part of the group at a ranch or a lumber camp or a mining location, when her father had taken her about with him, that a situation of this kind seemed a natural thing.

“There’s nothing they hate here in the West as they do a snob,” thought Isabel. “And I don’t blame them.”

“Sarah’s wondering where you are, I dare say,” Mrs. Rader was remarking to Stephen while she poured the tea. Her eyes twinkled as she spoke to the lad.

“No, she isn’t. I told her you’d ask me to stay to supper,” grinned Steve.

Isabel was wondering whether Stephen cared for the Clarks as if they were his own people, and how they felt about him. It must be hard just to have been “found on the street,” and to be a “stray” boy. She felt a sense of pity for him; and then it came to her that pity was rather insulting when a young man was as healthy and happy and cheerful as Stephen. “I’ll wait and see, before I permit myself to be sorry for him,” she thought. She turned to speak to Mrs. Rader, and devoted herself to a discussion of the process of raising chickens; and to the virtues of a story which had been running in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

After supper, Isabel and Meta and Mr. Houston

and Stephen sat out in front of the house on some rustic seats, and talked intermittently of things that had happened during the summer, and of life on the ranches. The blue horizon which had been one of the great charms of the plains during the day now took on the bright colors of sunset. The long tawny bench-lands grew dusky and mysterious. The sweep of open sky seemed vaster and more expansive as it lost the brilliant glare of day.

"It's wonderful," said Isabel, half to herself. "Everything has such a *bigness* to it. I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

"It is satisfying," answered Mr. Houston. "There's a feeling that the open country gives you, that nothing else does."

Meta was holding to her father's arm as she sat looking off across the benches. "If only Mumsey and Popsey-Professor were here!" thought Isabel, using her childish names for them out of the impulse of affection. "How they would enjoy it. I hope that father won't grind away in the summer school next year, and that he and mother will take a real vacation and come West."

Stephen rose and said he must go. With a friendly "See you to-morrow," he slipped away to saddle his horse and ride home in the twilight. The talk died down. Isabel was glad to go to bed early, and to lie thinking in the dark, for she was more tired than sleepy. She thought of Touchstone, and how he exclaimed, after his travels, "Ay, now am I in Arden!" and she repeated to herself, "Ay, now am I on a ranch in Montana!" She was surprised to find herself where she had really never expected

to be. She smiled at recollecting that Touchstone also said, "When I was at home, I was in a better place." "Of course," she thought, "home is the best place of all, but I'm glad I'm here just the same."

She thought about Stephen again, and his life here on the plains. She remembered how she and Fanny used to say, "You're 'dopted!" when they wanted to vex each other, because being adopted seemed about the worst thing that could happen to any one. And Fanny used to run crying to her mother, and say, "Am I 'dopted, mother?" never quite convinced in spite of reassurances.

The sounds about the house subsided, and the young woman slept peacefully in Susie Rader's bed. The next morning after breakfast, Mr. Houston rode away, and the girls were left to their own devices. Mr. Rader was out overseeing the work on the ranch, and Mrs. Rader was busy with the housework. Isabel and Meta made their own beds, to save Mrs. Rader the trouble, and then they walked out a little way from the house, rejoicing in the fresh air and the sprinkle of bitter-root blossoms under-foot. The quiet and isolation seemed not dull, but soothing. They had very little to say to each other, for both were busy with their thoughts.

They had just strolled back, when they saw Stephen coming on horseback, and lifting his hat as he approached. He leaped down as they arrived at the doorstep. "My mother says," he told them eagerly, "that she would be pleased if you would come over for dinner, and you're to come early,—now, if you can."

"We'd be delighted," the girls answered. They ran to change into their riding skirts, and to put on their hats.

Stephen saddled the horses, and had them out in front of the house in short order. With a good-by to Mrs. Rader, the three young people started on their ride to the next ranch, several miles away. As they cantered up a rise in the bench-lands, they could see more distinctly the blue-green of the foothills half-covered with pines, and the dark line of the range beyond. The land sloped down into a small valley, where willows and cottonwoods marked the course of a rivulet.

"There's the house," said Stephen presently, motioning toward the willows. As the party drew nearer, they could see the low log ranch-house, and the outlying buildings, all in the silvery gray of weather-worn wood. "That building next to the house is the bunk-house," Stephen explained, "where the hired men sleep if we have any; and there's the corral — the big one, I mean, — and the little one is right behind it."

They clattered across the bridge, and came up to the house. Clothes were flapping whitely on the line, and chickens ran about the space between the house and the stables. Nasturtiums were blooming under the windows, and a row of hollyhocks softened the end of the dwelling.

"How homey it looks!" said Isabel.

"It does to me," answered Stephen.

They rode up to the side door, and Mrs. Clark came out. She was a plump fresh-faced woman of about thirty-five. Her dark hair was becomingly

arranged, and she wore a dark blue print dress, well fitting and neatly made, with a white lace-trimmed collar. Isabel liked her at once.

"Well, Stevie," she said happily, "so you've brought your new friends?"

"Mm-hh-m," mumbled Stephen. "This is Miss Carleton, and this is Miss Houston — my mother, Mrs. Clark." Introductions were always difficult for him.

"I'm so glad you could come," said Mrs. Clark cordially. "And I didn't think you'd stand on ceremony about it."

"No, indeed," Isabel replied. "It was awfully nice of you to ask us."

They were now dismounting, and Stephen was taking the horses away. He let his own horse follow while he led the two others. "I wanted you to come as soon as you'd rested from your trip," Mrs. Clark was saying. "Stephen was so taken with all of you that day — Saturday, wasn't it? — that he met you over in Confederate Gulch, that I was getting impatient to see you myself."

"We liked him, too," said Meta in her direct way. "And we were glad that he could arrange for us to come."

Mrs. Clark was leading the way into the house. "I know you don't want to stay indoors," she said, "but do come in for a little while."

She took them through a kitchen-and-dining-room, to the sitting-room at the front of the house. It had a dull-toned carpet, plain oak furniture, a book-case filled with books, an organ, and a victrola. The

effect was more harmonious than that produced by the Raders' sitting-room.

"What comfortable homes you ranch-people have," Isabel said warmly.

"We give up a good deal, being so isolated," Mrs. Clark answered, "and we try to make it up to ourselves with a few things that will break the monotony. I want Steve to enjoy his home," she added earnestly.

"I'm sure he does," said Isabel. She could see that Mrs. Clark was very fond of him.

"He's a lively boy, and it takes a good deal to keep him interested." Mrs. Clark spoke with pride of the boy's active mind.

"Did he tell you about saving the horse for us?" asked Meta, unpinning her hat, and letting Mrs. Clark take it from her.

"Yes. It was exciting, wasn't it?"

"I was almost in fits," confessed Isabel. "It didn't seem as if anything could save Diana. But Stephen rose to the occasion as coolly as could be."

"He always does," responded Mrs. Clark, "no matter how shy he may seem. When he was just a little fellow, he did some really brave things, and he was so timid and shrinking that you'd never imagine he could."

Isabel was impatient to be out looking at things, but she saw that Mrs. Clark enjoyed the visit from some one outside her own life.

"It's a great treat to me to have some 'women-folks' as we say here, to talk to," the older woman was continuing. "You see, we women lead rather

lonely lives. The men are away a good deal on the range, and we are often alone all day for weeks at a time. I've always liked people, and would have liked a social life if I hadn't been shut away from it."

The way in which she said this made a pull at Isabel's heart. "It's all very well," the girl thought, "for us to come out here for a change from a busy life. But it isn't so diverting to stay here day after day and year after year, without the pleasures that we take as a matter of course at home." She thought of the calls, the motor-rides, the parties, the dinners — even meeting people on the street or seeing them go by — and the constant diversion of the life she led in Jefferson. "And Mrs. Clark is a bright woman, who would enjoy those things," she said to herself. "I hope that sometime she can come and visit us." Already she felt that this was a friendship which would last.

Meta and Mrs. Clark were talking about Helena, where they both had a number of friends. Now Stephen came in with his hat in his hand. He joined in the conversation for a while, and then said hesitatingly, "Well, do you want to come out and see what little there is to see? I'll be glad to show you around."

The girls jumped up. "I want to see everything," said Isabel.

"Miss Tenderfoot is excited over an ant-hill," smiled Meta. "She's the most enthusiastic sight-seer you ever saw. Nothing escapes her, and she's interested in everything and everybody."

"That's the kind of people we like." Mrs. Clark laid her hand on Isabel's arm.

"Won't you come, too?" said Meta politely.

"No. I must stay and look after my dinner."

"Oh, you aren't going to fuss for us, are you?" protested Isabel.

"No, indeed; but we always have a hearty meal at noon anyway."

"Mother's the prize cook," said Steve, with his eyes on Mrs. Clark, who flushed girlishly.

"I'm just a plain cook," she laughed, "who has spent most of her life cooking for hungry men. Anything tastes good to them."

"You'll see," said Stephen, nodding at the young women, his red cheeks glowing.

A cat, yellow with green eyes, came purring toward them as they went out at the side door. Stephen took her up and stroked her. "This is Peggy-Puss," he said. "Our cats are always named Peggy-Puss, after the one we had when I first came to the ranch."

This was the first reference he had made to the fact that he was not an "own boy" to the Clarks. Isabel, who loved cats, caressed Peggy and was rewarded by loud purrs.

"I'll show you the stables first," said Stephen.

The buildings were carefully constructed and very neat, though made of logs and crude in appearance. The horses which Meta and Isabel had ridden were standing munching hay. Near them was Mr. Clark's riding-horse, Wampus, no longer so young as he once was. "And here in the other stable is my little horse, Scratch Gravel," said Stephen. He showed them a small cream-colored horse, no bigger

than a pony, who looked around at them with an intelligent eye, and whinnied for attention.

"He looks as if he knew a lot," commented Meta.

"He does," Steve replied. "He's been my pet for seven years. I'm pretty heavy to ride him now, but I take him out now and then. You could ride him, Miss Carleton."

"I'd like to." Isabel looked pleased.

"I'll show you his bridle." Stephen brought out the gay red and white horse-hair bridle made by prisoners in the penitentiary.

Then he showed his guests the big corral, where the horses were kept when they were brought in from the ranges; and the little corral, where each horse was "broken" separately from the rest. There were three or four savage looking bronchos in the big corral, and Isabel hung on the rails staring at them, watching them paw and sniff the air and run about the enclosure as if seeking a way of escape. Their wild aspect fascinated her, and she could hardly be dragged away to look at anything else.

Now there were the root cellars to look at, where vegetables were kept in winter; and the tool-sheds and work-shop, where repairs were made; and then the garden in the hollow, near the stream, where peas and carrots and corn and cabbages were growing.

"I made the garden," said Stephen with pride. And he pointed out some apple-trees on the hill side beyond the dip where the garden had been planted. "I suppose they look skimpy beside Eastern apple-trees," he said. "But we're proud of them. And

there's a funny story about them, too. When I was a little kid, I set the grass a-fire and spoiled all the trees but one — that one." He indicated a low gnarled tree with green apples on it. "My mother was awfully cut up about it — she was more sensitive about those things then than she is now; and so the next year my father sent for some apple trees and let me plant them, so that I could make up in that way for spoiling the others."

"And they're flourishing now," said Isabel, with an appreciative smile for the story. "Your father must be a nice man."

"He's the finest there is. Look, here's where I used to put water-wheels, and the current would whirl 'em around like mad."

"What's that queer thing?" asked Isabel. A machine of some sort had been fixed close to the shore of the little stream.

"That's a hydraulic ram, as they call it, that pumps water up to the house, so that we can have a bath-room and running water. Not many folks do, out here, but mother and father didn't rest easy till they got this thing installed. It's a help to mother in doing the house-work."

"What runs it?" asked Meta. Isabel had vaguely taken the power for granted.

"It runs itself, from the pressure of the current. It has a valve here — you see, and another here —" Stephen expounded the device to Isabel's polite and Meta's attentive ears.

And so they went the rounds, listening to Stephen's explanations. "You must love it here," said Isabel impulsively.

"I do. It's home, for one thing, and the outdoor life is great."

Isabel wanted to ask him about his plans for school, but hesitated because he seemed self-conscious with Meta. While the group sat talking on a bench at the door of the tool-shed, three horsemen appeared over the brow of a hill.

"Father and the hired men," said Stephen. He waved as the men came nearer. Mr. Clark came up to them, and the others rode on. The ranchman was tall and almost gaunt, with clear features and deep-set eyes. "These are — er — the young ladies I told you about," said Stephen; "they're staying at the Raders', you know."

"I'm glad to know you," Mr. Clark said, raising his wide-brimmed hat. "Steve told us about the horse. It was lucky he had the lariat along."

"I always do," Stephen remarked, with something near gruffness.

"Well, of course, any horse-wrangler does," Mr. Clark conceded. Then he said seriously, "I'm glad Steve has found some friends. It's sort of lonesome for him out here."

"Oh, no, it isn't," Stephen asserted quickly; "but of course it's good to find friends anyhow."

"Dinner time, isn't it?" said the older man. "Perhaps the young ladies don't know that we have dinner early." He rode on, and the three others strolled back to the house, where savory odors welcomed them.

They all sat down at the same table in the kitchen-dining-room, as they had done at the Raders'. There were gay chintz curtains at the windows, and

a few colored pictures on the walls. Strips of rag carpet lay across the floor. The hired men were big good-looking fellows, who devoted themselves to the food and said nothing. Conversation was not very flourishing, but there seemed to be no need of forcing it.

"Ah! cream pie!" Stephen exclaimed when the dessert came on. "I thought it would be. Mother always makes my favorite when there's any celebration."

"Are we the celebration?" asked Isabel.

"Yes. Didn't you know it?"

"We never dreamed it, but we're glad to be so celebrated."

Sarah Clark slyly slipped a second piece of the pie upon Stephen's plate when she thought no one was looking. "She thinks he's a little boy still," said Isabel to herself, "just as father can never remember that I'm as good as grown up."

The girls helped with the dishes, and there was a good deal of gay talk. And then Sarah Clark said soberly, "It seems good to have you girls here. I miss Susie Rader. She's gone to Oregon, you know, and she's going to be married when she comes back. When Steve goes, it will be lonesome for me."

"Is he going?" Isabel asked, as she stood with a dish-towel in her hand.

"Why, I say he is, but it isn't really decided. He finished the high school in Helena last June. We missed him, but of course he came home a great deal, for week-ends and vacations. So it wasn't so bad."

"And now the great question is, what he's to do next?" said Isabel.

"Yes. I think about it a good deal." The frying-pan absorbed Mrs. Clark's attention, and then the subject was changed.

After the dishes were finished, Stephen called the young women to come out; he had Scratch Gravel saddled for Isabel to ride. She rode up and down in the space between the house and the stables, and everybody was talking at once.

"You ought to have seen the little rascal buck when Steve first tried to ride him," said Mr. Clark. "He's old enough to be quiet now, but then he was a sly little rat. He threw Steve head over heels into the bushes, and scratched him almost to pieces."

"Scratched my eyes out, and I had to let him throw me another time to scratch them in again," commented Steve.

"Is he safe now, really?" asked Isabel in alarm.

"Perfectly," she was assured. "You don't need to worry."

She decided not to. Mr. Clark and Stephen got out the horses for themselves and Meta, and the group rode out toward the foot-hills. Isabel and Stephen rode together.

"These hills have been cleared up a good deal since I came here to live," said Stephen. "We get up our wood here, you know, and that gradually clears the land. I want to show you Jim Ball's Basin." They rode on farther, and he pointed out a hollow which was only scantily surrounded by trees, though a good many stumps were standing about. "Jim Ball was killed here by the Indians in

the early days," the lad went on, "and that's why it keeps the name. Well, when I was just a kid, eleven years old, I'd only been here on the ranch about a month. I had a calf named Spotty, and I thought she was just the grandest little beast living. On this day that I'm telling about, I went to look for her, and she was gone. I thought she had come up here to the foot-hills, so I started off to find her. It was late in the afternoon, and cloudy. Mr. Clark — my father — had gone to the Springs the day before, and hadn't got back. It wasn't so very cold when I started, and I had a sweater on, and no coat. Oh, say! maybe I'm boring you. Perhaps you don't want to hear this story."

"Oh, yes, I do," Isabel answered. "I suppose something exciting happened to you, and I have to know what it was."

"It began to get awfully cold when I'd been out a little while."

"Oh, dear!" said Isabel.

"Yes, it was *oh, dear* for me. The clouds got thicker and dusk was coming on, and I had lost my way. I found myself there in the Basin. It was just as open as it is now, but there were thick trees around it. I thought I saw Spotty on the other side, near the bushes. I went over, and all at once a huge animal stepped out of the underbrush. It seemed as big as a house to me. It had horns that stretched out like the branches of a tree, and it snorted like a locomotive letting off steam. There it was, towering up above me"—Stephen waved his hand to indicate the enormousness of the creature.

"What did you *do*?" breathed Isabel.

"I stood there for about ten years, scared so stiff I couldn't move. The animal was a moose, you know, and the one I'd thought was Spotty was a moose calf. There was another one, the mother, I suppose, rustling in the bushes."

"Poor child! And did they go after you?"

"Yes, they kept on snorting, and stepped out at me. I took to my legs and ran like a wild Indian, expecting every second that the biggest moose would land on the back of my neck. I certainly was one scared kid!" The boy looked over at his companion with a humorously reminiscent air.

"I should think so."

"Well, to make matters worse, I was more lost than ever. I'd escaped from the moose, but I kept going round in a circle; and it grew colder than Greenland, and sleet began to fall, and the dark came on in good earnest. Here I was, alone and lost and scared and freezing—" The boy's voice grew tense. "My! it seems real to me, even now."

Isabel waited for him to go on.

"I got so tired and cold I couldn't make another move; so I cuddled down in the leaves behind a rock, and drowsed off."

"The worst thing you could do," murmured the girl.

"Of course; but I'd got to the end of things by that time. I couldn't go a step farther. That was about the last of me —"

"And then?" asked Isabel.

Stephen looked over to where the tall ranchman was riding beside Meta. "And then my father came riding and calling through the woods — calling and

calling in the dark — and I thought I was in bed asleep, and that he was calling me to get up in the morning. And I made one great effort — I was almost gone, but I said as loud as I could, ‘Yes, yes, I’m coming!’ That was the last I knew till he’d got me home, and there was a light in the doorway, and Mother-Sarah stood there. It was like heaven.”

“Yes,” said Isabel.

Stephen was silent, flicking the grass with his quirt. After a while, he said, “And it was then that I found out that mother really cared for me. I thought she didn’t, before, and I guess she thought so, too. You see, I’m not — I’m —” He struggled to say what all at once seemed very difficult.

“Yes, I know,” the girl answered quietly. “Mrs. Rader told me.”

Stephen flushed. “I’m glad you know,” he said. “I suppose it seems queer to you.”

“Why, no,” answered the girl quickly, “I think it’s beautiful that you have such splendid people and such a good home.”

“I almost had to go to a — a *home*; you know what I mean — where they send children who haven’t any — family.”

Isabel looked at the lad with understanding. “But you didn’t have to,” she said.

“No. Somehow — I was only a little scared fellow, you know — but I just *wouldn’t* go to an institution. I don’t know how I had the courage, but I made up my mind there was some place for me in the world — somebody who would care.”

“And what did you do?”

Stephen smiled wryly. "I went down to Main Street — you've been in Helena?"

"Yes, we stayed there several days before we went to the mountains."

"Well, right in the deepest part of the Gulch — it used to be Last Chance Gulch, you know — there's a millinery store, with a candy shop across from it — Bruere's."

"We went there for sodas once or twice."

"I stood there in front of the millinery store and waited" — Stephen laughed in a nervous way — "waited for something to turn up. People went by, back and forth — all sorts of people — and I kept getting tireder and scareder every minute. A policeman came up and spoke to me, and asked me why I didn't go home. That nearly finished me."

"I can imagine!"

"Then my father and mother — Emery and Sarah Clark — came along."

"And found you!" Isabel's voice was glad.

"Well, mother dropped a bundle, and it all came loose, and I picked it up for her, as polite as you please; but all the time I had my eye on father. He looked so — so sort of good, you know."

"His eyes are beautiful."

"It was his eyes. It seemed as if I couldn't let him go away and leave me. And when I thought he was going to, I began to cry. He couldn't go away and leave me crying — he has such a soft heart. So the upshot of it was that they took me, and brought me along home with them."

"I feel as delighted as if it had been myself," Isabel exclaimed. Her face was lighted with relief.

"You see, I just *would* have them for my own folks," said Stephen soberly. "I suppose I've tired you terribly, telling you all about myself." He grew red with his apologies. "I never told any one so much before. I don't know why I told you. I — I thought you would be interested. I'm sorry if I've bored you."

"You haven't, at all," the girl rejoined. "I'm so glad I know. I should never have been really acquainted with you, if I hadn't known. It would be just a surface acquaintance — no reality in it." They rode on thoughtfully, hurrying their horses to catch up with the others. "I hope you'll have a chance to get acquainted with Rodney Fox," Isabel said as they cantered along; "I think you'd like him."

"I did like him when I met him last Saturday. He seems a lot older than I am. Of course he is a year or two older. And then I've seen so little and lived such a kind of simple life here on the ranch — I guess I act younger than I am."

They had now come up with Meta and Mr. Clark, and the conversation turned to the landscape and to Scratch Gravel's merits as a saddle horse — he had behaved irreproachably. As they rode back, Stephen or Mr. Clark pointed out various landmarks and the party were all talking and calling to one another.

Isabel felt that she had become a good friend of Stephen's during this short ride and that she understood his sensitive boyish nature. She knew that Mrs. Clark would be pleased at the friendship; but the younger woman felt conscience stricken at leav-

ing the hostess behind for so long. The girls had a half-hour with her, however, before they started back to the Rader ranch.

"I want you to come over and visit with me," Sarah Clark said. "This was Steve's day, but I'm going to be selfish enough to keep you the next time. Can you come soon?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Isabel. "Is to-morrow too soon?"

"Not at all. I want to talk with you about books and clothes, and all the other things that I don't have a chance to hear much about. You've been in Europe — Miss Houston told me. Just think of it!"

"I'd be awfully glad to tell you about it," responded Isabel whimsically. "I've never had a chance to tell any one yet. I can never make the family stop long enough to listen."

"I'll listen," said Mrs. Clark wistfully.

"You're very rash," Isabel assured her. "But all right then — to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII

SAPPHIRE AND GOLD

THE next day, Meta refused to go to the Clarks' with Isabel. "It's you that Mrs. Clark wants to see," she said, entirely without rancor. "I know that well enough. You and she have sort of 'found' each other, and you ought to have a chance to follow up your friendship."

"Oh, but, Meta," protested the other girl, somewhat distressed, "you were invited as much as I was. And how do you know that Mrs. Clark doesn't yearn for you as much as she does for me?"

"I know it perfectly well," Meta answered calmly. "You and she have just naturally gravitated toward each other, and she's aching to have a good talk with you — not about anything in particular, but just about things in general. She and I like each other well enough, but we don't need each other particularly. So you go on, and I shan't go to-day."

Isabel sighed. "When you talk in that tone, I know that it's no use to argue with you," she said. "You aren't mad, are you?"

"Oh, Isabel, what nonsense! No, of course I'm not mad. And there's something that I want to do. I want to take a long ride alone — I haven't had a chance for that, you know. I want to gallop, not

crawl along as one has to with a tenderfoot"—she laughed apologetically—"and ride and ride till I get enough. I love to go dashing across the benchlands, and I haven't been where I could for more than two years. I've decided to do that to-day."

"Very well," said Isabel. "I think it's lovely to do as one pleases. And I can understand how you want to get out and ride alone." Secretly, she knew that Meta was right about Mrs. Clark, too. Though Meta was friendly and pleasant, she had moods and reserves which made Mrs. Clark less frank than she would be with Isabel. "I'll tell that to our hostess—about the ride—and I think she will excuse you. Drop in if you ride over that way, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

The suitcases had come, and Isabel put on her green chambray dress, after pressing it in the kitchen. Stephen was to come over for the girls in the buckboard. Meta had already ridden away when he arrived, and he accepted Isabel's explanation without comment. "I don't blame her," was all he said.

On the way to the Clark ranch, Isabel spoke of her home people, and then of her sister Fanny. "Fanny's the flower of the family," she said enthusiastically. "She's really splendid. You'd like her, I'm sure. She's not a bit like me."

"If she were, she wouldn't be so bad," mumbled Stephen.

"Well, she isn't at all. She's dark and striking-looking—has a lot of temperament, and that sort of thing—the artistic nature, you know."

Stephen looked puzzled. "I — I'm afraid I shouldn't know what to say to any one like that. I guess I haven't much 'temperament.' "

"Oh, yes, you have," Isabel corrected him. "Stacks; but you keep it all covered up. Fanny's bursts right out. She's only fifteen, you know, and perhaps she'll control it better when she gets older. She plays the violin — maybe I mentioned it — and we think she's a genius or semi-genius or something. Anyhow, we have to be pretty careful how we treat her and what we say, for we never know when we're harrowing her soul."

"Whew!" Stephen shifted uneasily on the seat of the buckboard. "I see where I'd keep mum if I were around where she was!"

"Dear me! I didn't mean to give a false impression of her. She's really a sweet normal girl, with somewhat more character than girls usually have at her age. There's nothing sentimental about her. She's as straightforward as a little Indian. She thinks I'm terribly affected and sentimental, but she pretends to be absolutely matter-of-fact."

Stephen looked doubtful. "I think I'd be afraid of her," he said. "I'm sure I'd always do the wrong thing."

"No, you wouldn't. I hope you'll know my family sometime. It's wonderful to have a lovely home such as I have. I think I'm one of the most fortunate girls in the world."

There was a silence. Isabel felt that Stephen might think she meant to make comparisons between her home and his. "Mine has the same spirit that I felt in yours," she said easily: "freedom and

kindness, you know. Those things make the right sort of home anywhere."

"They do, I guess," Stephen answered. "I think that my father and mother are about as splendid as any one's father and mother could be. And you know, if you don't really — *belong*, you appreciate that sort of kindness more than as if you were born into it; because they don't *have* to do anything for you or like you unless they choose."

"I can see how that would be," Isabel agreed. "And I'm awfully glad you found them, Stephen."

"So'm I."

Mrs. Clark was looking for them, and came out as they drove into the yard. Isabel hurried to explain about Meta, and Mrs. Clark said, "It's a wonderful day for a long ride on the benches, and I'm sure she'll glory in it. And then she can come over here, plenty of other times." Isabel was relieved that the lady took things with such good sense.

Stephen left them when he went to put up the horse and then to work in the garden. Isabel, after the first greetings and explanations and commonplaces, got out her crocheting and sat down beside the window. Mrs. Clark had a bit of sewing which she took from a basket on the table.

"We were speaking about homes, coming over," said Isabel, "and I was saying that yours reminds me of my own. It's so friendly and restful."

"It's only a little place," said Sarah Clark. "When Stephen first came to us" ("She counts everything from that time," thought the girl), "it was still smaller; but we've built on the extra bedroom and the storeroom and bathroom, so that now

we have all that we really need. But I often wish for a better house with larger spaces and nicer furniture — the kind you see in the magazines,— rugs and mahogany pieces, and flowers and all that. I suppose the people that you go with have houses of that sort, don't they? ”

“ Why, y-yes, they do.” Isabel was rather startled. “ I never thought such an awful lot about it. Most of the college people have Oriental rugs and mahogany things — but some of them have awfully ordinary ugly homes, too. I think it's the spirit that counts in the home, a good deal more than the furniture.”

“ Perhaps. But I do love nice things — or I know I should if I could have them. And I want them nice for Stephen. He's never had much chance to live in a refined way. There were some splendid people in Helena who were good to him, and had him at their home a great deal — the Sherratts; but they've moved to Portland. Mr. Sherratt was a good friend to us.”

Isabel found that she had made a mistake in her pattern, and was busily unraveling several rows of stitches. “ That was fine,” she said absently.

“ You don't know Stephen's real name, do you? ” asked Sarah when the crocheting had begun again.

“ No, I never thought about its being anything but *Clark*,” Isabel confessed.

“ It's *Bransted*. Mr. Sherratt, the first year we had Stephen — let me see; I think he hadn't been here more than six months or so — discovered something in some legal reports about an estate that was to be settled in Michigan — and the name was

Bransted. He asked us if we wanted him to look the matter up."

"And did you?" Isabel's crochet-hook stood still.

"It seemed as if I couldn't bear the idea of somebody's taking Stephen away from us; but I thought it was only fair to give him a chance to get what belonged to him. So Mr. Sherratt wrote." Sarah paused to thread her needle.

"Was it a relative of Stephen?" Isabel was impatient, for she scented a long-lost rich relative, and all sorts of opportunities for the "stray" boy.

"Yes. But the property didn't really belong to Steve. The man who got it wrote to us, and said he would take Stephen if we would give him up right away, when he was young."

"Oh!" Isabel was disappointed and scornful.

"He wouldn't take him later, he said, when he would be ruined by living with coarse people on a ranch."

"Oh, no! He didn't say that!"

"Something of the sort. I kept the letter." Sarah frowned over her careful stitches.

"How foolish!" cried the girl.

"He didn't think so. Well, we put it up to Steve. He had to go then or never. It was a hard trial for us, and we gave him his free choice. We wanted to do what was right, and not have anything to regret; so we urged him to go if he wished to. It was right that he should have his chance, no matter how much it hurt us."

Isabel's crocheting fell into her lap. She stared at Mrs. Clark. "And wouldn't he go?"

"No. He said he belonged to us, and he was going to stay with us — that we cared for him, and the other man didn't. He stood up like a little major — he wasn't twelve years old — and made his choice in life, as brave as any grown-up man could have done. Emery — Mr. Clark — said to him, 'Be careful. Don't be rash, Steve. It's your last chance.' And Steve spoke up — his eyes were flashing — 'I don't believe there ever is any last chance!' he said. We've often laughed about it since." She smiled, but there was a suspicion of tears in her eyes.

"Good for Stephen!" Isabel's eyes brightened with admiration. "And so he stayed on with you!"

"It would just about have killed us to lose him," said Mrs. Clark in a low tone.

Isabel took up her work again. "And haven't the Bransteds done anything for him since?" she asked.

"They've sent him fifty dollars, every New Year's, and last year they made it a hundred. I think it was very nice of them, for he really hasn't any claim on them. He's never spent the money. It's in the bank at the Springs. We thought it would help out with his education."

"Yes, of course; it would."

The two women were silent for a few minutes, thinking over what had been said. Then Mrs. Clark spoke of Isabel's dress. "It's so dainty and simple," she said, "and so becoming."

"I made it myself," said Isabel.

"Oh, did you?" Sarah pondered over her work, and then said hesitatingly, "Perhaps you'd help me to decide how to make over a dress I have

— you see so many more pretty clothes than I do.”

“ I’d like to, if I can be of any assistance,” said Isabel. “ But I’m not sure that I can.”

Sarah brought out a dark blue silk dress, of the style of two years back. The material was good, and the dress was in good condition. “ You see,” Sarah explained, “ my clothes go out of style before I’ve worn them out, because I don’t have much of any place to wear them to. I try to keep one good thing on hand, so that if I want to go anywhere in a hurry, I have something to put on.”

“ I’m sure we could make something nice out of this,” the girl replied. She held up the dress, and the two began turning and twisting it, and discussing ways and means of using the breadths to the best advantage. They became so enthusiastic over the possibilities of the gown that Mrs. Clark began to rummage for patterns. In the end, the sewing machine was brought out of the storeroom, and the seamstresses fell to work in earnest, talking and sewing in deep oblivion to the passage of time.

It was almost noon when Mrs. Clark glanced at the clock. “ Goodness! I’ll have to hurry to get dinner,” she cried. “ Fortunately it’s all planned and partly prepared.”

Isabel helped to set the table, and the meal was ready when Mr. Clark and Stephen came in, followed by the two hired men.

There was a little talk about the activities of the morning, and then Mr. Clark spoke about the demand for horses in the European countries. “ It’s pretty hard,” he said, “ to see those free, willing creatures sent over there to suffer and die.”

"But men are suffering and dying," Isabel faltered. She had not thought about the horses in the war.

"Yes." Mr. Clark had evidently thought about the horses a good deal. "But men make their wars, and the horses don't. They have to take what comes to them, and they don't have any vote."

"I don't believe some of the men in the European countries have any more to say than the horses, about what they shall do," said Isabel.

"Or understand any better what it's all about," added Mrs. Clark with a sigh. "Let's hope that when the war is over, that very sort of people will have more liberty and the right to develop more intelligence."

"If they don't," Mr. Clark answered, "all this slaughter will be in vain."

"It can't be in vain," Isabel remarked miserably. "Some good must come out of it."

"Good can come out only in proportion to what is put in," said Emery Clark in a hard tone.

"Then the United States isn't going to get anything good out of it?" Isabel queried.

"Not unless we put something in. And we're going to. The time will come when we'll have to make our sacrifices — men as well as horses."

Isabel caught her breath and looked at Sarah Clark. The two hired men colored under their tan, and glanced uneasily at each other, as if they were wondering which was to be sacrificed.

Emery Clark was going on. "There are plenty of young strong fellows who will go into it intelligently, not driven in by an autocratic government —

and it's that sort that will win the war. How about it, Steve?" He turned to the youth, who had sat silently listening to what had been said.

"I'm willing to help," said Stephen, "but I'm not sure that you and mother would be very keen to see me starting off."

Sarah restrained a shudder. "I think it will be over before you're old enough to be called," she said as lightly as she could. "And just think," she continued, to change the subject, "I was going to hear all about Miss Carleton's trip to Europe, and we've been so busy with dress-making that I haven't heard a word."

"I think you've been saved a boring experience, if you ask me," said Isabel.

After dinner, Stephen played the victrola, and they all sat listening, Emery with his eyes on the floor. There were some good records, and some funny ones, which Stephen chuckled over, glancing at Isabel to see whether she were going to be appreciative or scornful. Isabel chuckled, too, much to the lad's relief.

When the men had gone, Sarah and Isabel hurried to wash the dishes, and then they rushed back to their sewing. "I'm surprised to see that you know so much about this sort of thing," said Mrs. Clark. "A college girl is hardly expected to, is she?"

"Oh, I've had a lot of Domestic Science and Household Arts, in the high school and in college, too," the girl said in explanation. "I thought I told you." She was basting a sleeve together as she spoke.

"It's fine that you can have so much practical

training, along with the academic studies," commented Mrs. Clark.

"I love to work with my hands," Isabel rejoined. "And oh, I must tell you about my arts and crafts work." She launched into the story of her silver-smithing, and the pleasure she had taken in making simple pendants and rings. "It's the nicest work there is," she asserted; "unless writing books might be a little nicer."

"Do you really make jewelry?" asked Sarah Clark, standing with her shears poised above the cloth on the table.

"Why, yes, surely. I made this ring with the abalone shell setting." She showed her little-finger with a silver ring on it. "I can do better than that now. I brought my tools along, and I've been doing a few things at the camp, this summer. I want to have some things ready for the Molly Ramsay Fund in the fall."

"What is that?" Mrs. Clark looked interested.

Isabel talked fast, and her eyes grew bright as she told the tale of the beginnings of the Fund,—the maid that she didn't have when she went to Europe, and the money which had been unexpectedly paid to Cousin Eunice Everard, and various gifts from Faculty women. And then she went on to tell of what the Fund had done for girls who needed help in getting through school. "It's wonderful to see what a little help will do for people," she said in conclusion.

"Yes, it is." Sarah nodded over the cuff which she was cutting out. "It's beautiful to see people getting their chance in life." She was thoughtful as

she pinned the cuffs together, with strips for the facing. "You're going to make some things and then sell them — is that the idea?" she asked.

"Yes. There is a chance toward Christmas, and sometimes before. People come in to the Crafts room, and see the things and want to buy them. I sold a ring for enough to buy quite a lot of silver and an inexpensive stone or two. And I made mother a lovely pendant — if I do say it — set with a turquoise."

Sarah threaded a needle with basting-thread and then stood absently with it in her hand. "Did you ever seen any Montana sapphires?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh, yes! Meta Houston has a ring set with them. They're lovely — paler than the other kind, but beautiful, I think."

"Would they be all right to make your jewelry of?"

"I've been aching for some to make up, but they were so expensive in Helena that I thought I couldn't afford any." Isabel was puzzled at the lady's questions.

Sarah dropped her needle on the table. "I have a wonderful idea," she said eagerly. Her face was lighted with enthusiasm. "I want to show you something."

She went into her bedroom, while Isabel sat breathlessly waiting. "Look," said Sarah when she came back. She held a tiny box in one hand, and the cover in the other.

Isabel peeped into the box. On white cotton-batting lay a half-dozen blue stones, not large, but

clear and sparkling. "Why, they're Montana sapphires, aren't they?" said Isabel in a dazed way. "They're beauties!"

"Yes, that's what they are," Sarah answered almost solemnly.

"Why, where did you get them?"

"Well, one time Stephen was up in the mountains with the Sherratts — they had a claim up there. Mr. Sherratt is a well-educated man, and he knows a lot about geology and such things, and he knew the uncut sapphires when he saw them. They found quite a lot, and Steve found these himself. The Sherratts insisted on his keeping them."

"They don't 'grow' like this, do they?" asked Isabel rather inanely. She took up the blue drops in her fingers.

"Oh, no, of course not. Mr. Sherratt sent Steve's with his to have them cut, and it didn't cost so very much. Emery and Steve and I put it in together. They thought I ought to have something made of them sometime. They're really pretty, don't you think?"

"Exquisite!" Isabel was wondering what Mrs. Clark meant to do with them.

"I thought — if I gave these, could you make them into rings, and sell them for the Molly Ramsay Fund?"

Isabel let the stones fall into the box and clasped her hands. "*Could* I? That would be magnificent. But do you want to give them up — when Stephen gave them to you?" A doubt clouded her face as she spoke.

"He won't mind. Yes, I do want to do some-

thing for that fund." Mrs. Clark's voice was more eager than ever. "I never had a chance to go to college — I hardly dared to think about it, though I studied and learned as much as I could by myself. But I do want other girls to have an education, and I'd like to help a little bit if I could. These aren't of any great value unless they're made into something. It isn't a very grand gift," she laughed. "The value is the pleasure I get out of it."

"It will help wonderfully to have them. Thank you a thousand times." The girl took up the stones, and held them to the light. "I'd love to work with them, and I'd do the very best I could to make something that would be worthy of them."

"Then you take them, and do what you think right," said Sarah, "and sell the jewelry, and add the money to the Fund after you've taken out the cost of the silver or gold or whatever it is you use." Her plump youthful face was happy and her cheeks were red.

"I think you're splendid to do this," Isabel repeated. "I shall wait till I get back to Jefferson before I do anything with them for I want Miss Phelps — she's our director — to show me about the work, and see that I get it just perfect. I've never worked much with gold, and I think that gold would be best for these, don't you?"

"I haven't any idea. Now, you take the box and put it with your hat, so that you won't forget it."

"As if I could!" Isabel put her arm around Mrs. Clark's waist and kissed her. "You're a dear," she said. Then she went to put the box into her cross-stitched linen handbag.

The two women went back to their sewing, and each felt a glow that cast a radiance upon the cloth which they were handling. They said little, while their hands sped with the work.

When Stephen came in, they had made good progress, and were ready to stop and gossip with him. Isabel went to the door and looked out upon the great sweep of the sky, and the stretch of the tawny benches. "It's heavenly here," she sighed. "How much it must mean to you!" She had forgotten the isolation of this little ranch-house in the bottom-lands.

"How would you like to spend the winter here?" asked Sarah Clark in a tense tone.

"Mm-m," Isabel stammered, "I — I'm afraid I shouldn't know what to do with myself. I do have a very gay time, in spite of studying. I'm sure I'm spoiled, but I can't help it." She was a bit ashamed of having brought up the subject.

"Girls *ought* to have a good time," said Sarah Clark. "And boys, too." She laid her hand on Stephen's shoulder.

Stephen turned to her with a reassuring grin. "I have one grand good time here," he said. "You don't need to worry about me."

Just then they saw Meta dashing along the line of sky at the top of a long "bench," and presently she clattered over the bridge and rode up to the door. She was disheveled, but brilliant with the joy of her day of freedom.

"I just came to say 'How do you do?' and get a drink of water," she explained, "and then I'll ride back to the Raders'."

She did not stay long, but rode off after a few minutes, promising to come the next day with Isabel. "She's a very spirited girl, isn't she?" said Mrs. Clark, watching the graceful figure until it disappeared beyond a knoll.

"Yes," Isabel replied, "energetic and ambitious and high-tempered. She has a great deal of ability. We think she's going to be a fine actress if she goes on the professional stage, as she hopes to do."

Stephen and his mother were suitably impressed. Isabel told them of Meta's success with the college plays in which she had appeared. "How college does bring out one's talents, and develop one's abilities," said Mrs. Clark, looking hard at Stephen.

"I don't know what it could do for them if they *hadn't* any talents or abilities," said the young man frivolously. "Oh, Miss Carleton —"

"Isabel."

"Well, Miss Isabel, then — you haven't heard *Old Montana* yet, have you?"

"I guess not," Isabel answered. "What is it — a song?"

"Yes, the State song — it goes to the tune of *Mandalay*. You know that, don't you?"

"On the Road to Mandalay,
Where the flying-fishes play,"

Isabel was humming. "Is that the tune?"

"Yes, that's it. Mother, you play, and we'll sing it." Stephen ran to open the organ which stood in a corner of the sitting-room, and to get out the music for the performers.

By peering over Mrs. Clark's shoulder, Isabel was

able to join in almost from the first. She had always liked the swing of the tune, and now she delighted in the words:

Take me back to old Montana,
Where there's plenty room and air;
Where there's cotton-wood and pine-tree,
Bitter-root and prickly-pear.

Where the old sun-tanned prospector
Dreams of wealth and pans his dirt;
Where the sleepy night-herd puncher
Sings to steers and plies his quirt.

They came out lustily with the chorus:

Take me where there's diamond hitches,
Ropes and brands and cartridge belts;
Where the boys wear shaps for breeches,
Flannel shirts and Stetson felts.
Land of alkali and copper,
Land of sapphire and of gold,—
Take me back to dear Montana,
Let me die there when I'm old!

"Oh, play that last again," begged the girl. She wanted to sing over again the two lines:

"Land of alkali and copper,
Land of sapphire and of gold."

"It means the sapphire blue horizon and the gold sunshine, as well as the real things, doesn't it?" she remarked when they had finished.

"I think so," smiled Mrs. Clark. "We like it out here in Montana. It catches the spirit of things. Back East, I suppose they'd think it was silly."

"I like it immensely," said Isabel. "I'm so glad you let me hear it. I'm going to learn the words. And now I remember, I've heard Meta humming that and putting in some different words from the ones in *Mandalay*, but I never realized that it was *Old Montana* that she was singing. She ought to have told me. But now that I think of it, I dare say I've teased her so much about being crazy over the West that she never said half as much as she wanted to. I'll never jolly anybody about being a Wild-West 'fan' again."

"Better not," Stephen warned her. "You might have to suffer the consequences."

"And now I ought to go," murmured Isabel, looking at the clock.

"Oh, stay for supper," coaxed Mrs. Clark. "We're going to have hot johnny-cake and wild plum preserves. Maybe you'd have something better at Mrs. Rader's, but anyhow, we'd like to have you stay."

"Then I will," said Isabel.

It was late before she finally got started. She pinched the little box in her handbag, to make sure that it was there. "I'm taking away something very precious," she said in a low tone to Sarah.

"I'm keeping something very precious, too," Sarah replied seriously. "You'll come again — every day, if you can while you're here. And Miss Houston is to come, too."

"Yes, yes."

Stephen took Isabel back in the buckboard, as he had brought her. Dusk was falling over the long uneven bench-lands. "Oh, such color!" the girl ex-

claimed. A dull blue haze was over everything, and the moon was rising through it, large and orange-tawny, lighting the tops of shadowed knolls and flats. On the edge of an eminence, a clump of cottonwoods showed a blurred outline against the sky, or a supernatural looking horse stalked blackly along the horizon.

Isabel was rapturously silent for some time, and then she remembered to tell her companion about the sapphires which she was carefully holding in her lap. He listened quietly, his eyes on the horse's ears. "You don't mind, do you?" asked the girl anxiously. "Would you rather she had kept them?"

"I'm glad she found such a good use for them," the young man replied quickly. "Nothing pleases me better than to please her."

"I thought you'd have that feeling about it." Isabel spoke with relief. "I'll try to make the rings as near perfection as I can. They ought to bring quite a good sum. And oh, Stephen!"

"What?"

"Don't you think it would be splendid if I made a ring for Mrs. Clark, with one of the sapphires? It seems as if she ought not to give them all away."

"It would be great, if you really want to do it. I'll furnish the silver or gold. Is it gold that you use?"

"I ought to, for this. It would cost about three dollars or possibly four for the gold. One starts out with more than the finished article actually shows. The value of a thing like that is in the workmanship and the time it takes."

"Well, when you get around to make it, I'll be there with the goods."

"It will be a surprise to her. Do you think she will like it?"

"I should say. She's mighty fond of pretty things, but she doesn't have very many."

The conspiracy occupied them until they reached the Raders'. They parted with a quickened sense of their rapidly developing comradeship.

The week of the girls' stay in the ranch country passed swiftly. Nearly every day there was some new thing to do. One morning, Stephen proposed that he should take them to the ice-cave, and show them "Mother Nature's Refrigerator Company." This was a cave in the foothills, at some distance from the house, where the ice never completely melted, and where there was plenty to be had for ice-cream in the warmest day of summer. It was here that Isabel first saw the big purple anemones which abound in the mountains in the spring. They had passed from the slopes, long since; but in the region of the ice-cave, spring beauties and anemones still flowered, thinking, no doubt, that the cool blast from the cave was the last of the winter winds. The great delicate blossoms of pale lavender or deeper mauve, with their hairy calyxes, clustered about the mouth of the cave, and distracted Isabel's attention from the wonders within. She was instantly thinking of a poem which she would write about these flowers; but she had no time for it then, for Stephen was climbing down into the well-like cave, with a pail which was to bring up the pilfered ice.

When she looked over the edge, she could see the

ice gleaming in waves and ridges, as in a kind of Aladdin's cave of jewels. Stephen was hacking off bits of it, and soon filled the pail, which he fastened to a rope, and which Meta and Isabel pulled bumping and hopping to the surface, and covered quickly with old carpet to keep it from melting. Two other pails were filled, and then Stephen scrambled out with red chilled hands and tousled hair. The ice, swiftly conveyed in the buckboard, yielded delicious ice-cream, under Sarah Clark's supervision.

That evening, Isabel wrote the poem about the anemones, and put it away to show to Rodney when she went back to the camp. She did not have much time to think about Rodney, but now and then her mind reverted to the three cabins on the hillside, and she wondered how they seemed when deserted by their feminine occupants. She knew that the two young engineers were busy with their renewed attempt to build a weir which should resist the attacks of mountain streams; but she suspected that the evenings were lonely for them, after the gayety which had prevailed when the whole party had been there. However, a letter from Rodney found its way to her, assuring her that all was well, except that it was "doggoned lonesome" and the coyotes howled louder than ever around the hills.

There was a trip to the sheep country, where the sight of thousands of sheep grazing or huddled into a corral moved Isabel to interest and amaze; and another excursion to a cattle ranch yielded a good deal of instruction and diversion. The intervals of jaunting about were filled with the excitement of seeing bronchos broken in the corrals at the Clark

ranch — a fascinating business which Isabel rated high above any theatrical performance she had ever seen. She never tired of it, and always came back to it with a zest which amused the ranch-folk, to whom it was an old story.

Then the letter came from Mr. Houston, telling them the particular day upon which he would arrive to take the two young women "home." Suitcases were packed and sent on by stage. Meta invited Stephen to go back with them, and he accepted with alacrity. On the night before they were to start back, Emery and Sarah rode over in the buckboard to say good-by.

"It has done me so much good to know you two," said Sarah. "It has been a glimpse of the outside world — something new and different."

"You're coming to Jefferson to visit, you know," answered Isabel. "Mother would love to have you."

"I'd be more than delighted," said Sarah, "but I don't suppose I'd ever get there. Wouldn't it be rather presumptuous of me to go when I don't know your people?"

"It wouldn't take you more than two minutes to feel as if you'd always known them," asserted Isabel. "You'd like them all — father and mother and Fanny and Celia. They're dears. I don't want you to judge my family by me."

"She's a pretty fair sample," put in Meta. "Anyhow, you must come. I'd want you some of the time, you know."

"We'll see," responded Sarah. "Emery would hardly think that he could spare me, I'm afraid."

"He's to come, too. Of course I meant that." Isabel was embarrassed at her awkwardness.

"I don't know how I'd fit into a professor's circle," said Emery with his slow, humorous smile; "I might get to swinging my lariat around on the campus, or come to a tea-party with my trousers tucked into my boots, or start talking about the price of steers when somebody was giving a high-brow spiel on Shakespeare."

Isabel laughed. "Oh, no danger. And it would do them good if you did."

It gave Isabel a pang to come to the moment of saying good-by to these kind people, whom she had liked so much. "I feel sure we'll meet again," she said.

"So do I," Emery Clark rejoined. "Friends can't lose each other."

The grasp of Emery's hand and Sarah's kiss upon her cheek were assurances that she would be remembered. She was thankful for them the next morning when the hurt of leaving the ranches actually came.

The long ride back to the home gulch was easier than it had been before. The joyous welcome from the family was very sweet to the traveler, and she felt the delight of the home-coming in Rodney's low remark as he lifted her from the saddle,—
"Great Cæsar, how we've missed you! It seems as if the sun were just coming up instead of going down!"

CHAPTER XIII

DECISIONS

THERE was such a babel of talk that Isabel did not have a chance for an extended inquiry-and-reply with any one, though there were many questions she would have liked to ask, as to how things had been going during the absence of the women.

After a word — “ It’s beautiful to see you again,” and “ We must have a good talk ” — with Mrs. Houston, Isabel slipped away to read her letters in the Ritz. She finished with a letter from Fanny, who wrote in a characteristic way:

Dear Isabel:

It’s awfully hot, and I’m out on the back porch, writing on a scratch pad. Mother is worrying for fear we don’t write to you often enough, but I tell her she needn’t fuss, for probably you’re too busy having hair-breadth escapes to waste any attention on poor US. Every letter we get from you seems to have a grizzly bear in it, or a cloud-burst, or a horse falling over a precipice, or some such little thing. You’ll find home and mother pretty tame, after all those Wild-West performances.

We just jog along here in a perfectly safe and sane way, with nothing whatever to escape from. Anna Paul and I are invited to stay for the week-end at the Mitchells’ cottage, and Howard Sutro and a

friend of his from Winona are going to be there. We expect to be on and in the water most of the time.

Grammy was in (not in the water), one day this week, and she brought us a lot of gooseberries, and mother and Melissy have made preserves until they are getting so that they look just like gooseberries themselves — sort of fat and round and green and purple, you know what I mean. Melissy has a new green gingham dress, which increases the ilusion.

[“ Oh, dear, only one *l*,” sighed Isabel.]

I forgot to tell you in my last letter that I saw that Miss Calderwood — the one who’s staying for the summer session, you know, and she looked just fine — not so kind of pinched and sad. . . .

Celia misses you a lot, especially at bedtime. She gets fearfully mad at me because I can’t tell her favorite stories precisely as you do. If I say that the princess had on a blue dress and a gold crown, she nearly has a fit, and insists that that particular princess had on a pink dress and a pearl crown — Isabel said so. I think she’s too big to have stories told to her, anyway. I’m sure I never did at her age. Mother babies her too much, *I* think, because she’s the youngest. I told mother so, and she just laughed.

I meet the D’Alberts sometimes and do you know that baby of theirs can walk. It totters along on its two little legs and squawks out *V’la*, and *Bong joor*, and other French stuff in the killingest way. I should think . . .

Isabel glanced through the rest of the letter, and

thrust it back into the envelope. Supper was on the table; and she felt concerned as to whether Stephen were being looked after. Stepping out of the Ritz, she found Rodney carrying a pail of water up the hill.

"Don't fall down and break your crown," she warned him.

"I won't. But say, Isabel, there's something I want to tell you. I'll be back in a minute." He disappeared into the cook-cabin, and then came out again. "Mr. Chelford was here while you were gone," he said.

Isabel looked blank. "Mr. Chelford?" Then she recollected. "Oh, he's your employer, isn't he?"

"Yes. He surprised us by dropping in, one forenoon."

"Well. What did he think of the way that things were going?" Isabel was almost as apprehensive as if she had been the subject of an inquisition, herself.

"He was pleased. He looked the weir over, and said it was all right. We had a long talk with him and got pretty well acquainted. He's a fine fellow."

"He didn't scold about the first weir?"

"Not a bit. It was hardly mentioned. But it dawned on me after he had gone that in his clever way he had put us both through a hard grilling — found out everything we'd ever thought in the dead watches of the night. He was sizing us up in good shape."

"I'm sure he didn't find out anything to your discredit," the girl said loyally.

"I hope not. Apparently he was satisfied, for he's written to offer us both jobs for next year."

"Oh! Out here — in the West?"

"Yes."

"How does that strike you?" Isabel repressed her own feelings.

"It's tempting."

"Would you think that you could leave college?"

"I don't know. I should terribly like to be independent."

Isabel's eyes met his, and then turned away at a call from Mrs. Houston, who was complaining with mock bitterness that she couldn't get any one to come and eat.

After supper, Meta and George strolled away without any excuses. "They can't wait. They want to talk everything over," thought Isabel. She helped Mrs. Houston with the dishes, telling all about the visit to the ranches, while she dried the plates and cups.

She had another snatch of conversation with Rodney when he was building a camp fire: the night had grown chilly.

"How long before you have to decide?" she asked.

"A week or so. There's no hurry."

"It's fine that he wants you," she said dubiously.

"I'd hate not to be back in Jefferson." Rodney lighted a match and carefully applied it to the dry grass and shavings. The light flared up and showed his face, meditative and sober.

"I — I'd be sorry too."

"Glad you feel that way."

He had more to say, but just then Stephen sauntered up shyly, with his hands in his coat pocket. "He's afraid he's *de trop*," Isabel said to herself. She felt anxious lest he should be ill at ease. "Come on up to the fire," she said. "And let's all sit down and talk a little." Mr. and Mrs. Houston were in the tent, George and Meta were nowhere to be seen; so the three had things all to themselves.

The Middle-Westerners began questioning the lad, to draw him out. "I suppose you've had a lot of interesting adventures, out there on the ranch," said Rodney.

"Oh, I don't know," Stephen answered; "I guess you fellows back in your country have had just as exciting things happen to you. Ranch life is about the same as any other."

"But your mother said you'd had some exciting experiences," said Isabel.

"Oh, she thinks I'm so important that if I rode to Helena and back, it would be an adventure," said Stephen. He tossed a pine cone into the fire.

"Oh, tell us that experience at Fort Logan. You said you'd tell me, and we never got around to it," cried Isabel. She was really thinking more about Rodney's problem than she was about Fort Logan.

"That was when father captured the express robbers," Stephen replied. "They were the last desperadoes that we've had in our part of the country — the West is pretty tame, now, you know."

"Were you one of the *posse*?" the older man inquired.

Stephen chuckled. "I was right in the thick of it. It was almost like a story-book. Believe me, I

was one proud kid to be mixed up in such doings. You couldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole for a month afterward."

"How did it happen?"

"I was a little chap — this was six or seven years ago — and Al Trowbridge and I had a 'rong-de-voo,' as we called it. Al lived five miles away, and we were chums. He's gone East now, to attend college and stay four years. Well, this 'rong-de-voo' was in one of those empty houses at Fort Logan."

"They looked awfully spooky," Isabel nodded.

"We kept it a secret, and used to ride over there on the sly, and make a fire, and roast things on the hearth, and play we were some sort of mysterious characters."

"Kid-fashion," assented Rodney.

"Yes. We thought it was great stuff. One day in February, I think it was, we rode over, and we were squabbling on the way, and got so mad we wouldn't speak to each other. And when we got to the door of our house, we found two desperadoes there, playing cards for the money they'd stolen."

"Did you burst right in on them?" queried Isabel.

"They hadn't heard us, and we were in the house before they knew it. They wouldn't let us get away, for fear we'd tell some one. We were scared just about into conniptions — two little chaps, you know —"

"I guess yes," interpolated Rodney.

"They stuck us into a corner, and began to talk about putting us upstairs and nailing the door."

"Pleasant talk!"

"And just when we were ready to faint, who should appear on the scene but my father! He covered the two robbers with his revolver. Then he made me take one of the revolvers from the table, where the robbers had laid it, and help to guard the men; and he sent Al to tell the Raders. It seemed like two hundred years that we stayed there watching those fellows. They were waiting for a chance to bowl us over and skip, but we never gave it to them. I thought my arm would drop off, but I was game, because Emery Clark was watching me. I'd have hung by my toes all day if he told me to."

"I know," said Isabel, remembering the way in which Emery Clark had looked at Stephen when he thought that no one noticed.

"The Raders came and tied the desperadoes up, and the next day they took 'em to jail at the Springs. You see that *was* a wild adventure, for a kid like me. I don't suppose anything could ever happen to me that would make me feel more set-up than I was then."

"A small boy could ask nothing more," laughed Rodney. "I should have burst with pride if anything like that had happened to me at that age."

"I nearly burst, all right." Stephen had forgotten his self-consciousness, and was enjoying his own reminiscences. "There was another time that was not so glorious for me. The cow-punchers were swimming some steers across the river, and I was there as big as life, on Scratch Gravel, wading around where it was kind of shallow. A big steer came

alongside, and without thinking what I was doing, I jumped across onto his back. He turned and rushed out of the water and up the bank, before I could jump off, and he galloped all over the range with me yelling like a Comanche and hanging onto his neck. I thought I was a goner, sure thing."

Isabel laughed merrily. "How did you escape? I infer that you did escape."

"Oh, yes. I fell off, after a while, and the steer's hoof gave me a crack on the head as he skallyhooted away: There's a little scar there yet." He turned his head to one side, and in the flare of the fire Isabel saw a small white scar in the fine fair hair. "Mother was sure I was killed, but I was as good as ever in a day or two."

"A ranch must be a great place for a boy," said Rodney.

"I wouldn't give up having lived on one, for anything."

"But you don't want to stay there always, do you?" asked Isabel. She recollected that Stephen had his problem to work out, too.

"I'm not sure. I'd have to think it over, if I had a chance to do anything else."

Mr. and Mrs. Houston came out of the tent just then, and joined the trio at the fire. Isabel was tired after her ride, and went to bed early.

Meta came into the Ritz after Isabel was in bed. She pulled the curtains and lighted a candle. She had an absent, preoccupied look. "Awfully exciting about the boys, isn't it?" said Isabel sleepily.

"Yes, it is," answered Meta. "I'm glad they've been successful."

"Mm-huh," Isabel murmured. "Do you think George will stay?"

"He hasn't quite decided yet." Meta began to take the hairpins out of her hair.

Isabel was too sleepy to pursue the conversation further. She thought, "What a lot of decisions there are to make!" as she was drifting off into slumber.

The Houstons had already made their decisions about their new home in Seattle. Isabel had gathered as much, but forebore to ask questions. The next forenoon, Mrs. Houston told her more about it.

"We have taken a delightful apartment — new and fresh, and with a wonderful view; and we're to try that instead of a house."

"Ha! the lady has her way," cried the girl. "And does that mean that you are to keep on with your school?"

"I believe it does." Mrs. Houston looked extremely contented.

"I'm just as glad as I can be. I knew you wanted to, like everything."

"Yes, I did; but I wasn't intending to press the matter if Mr. Houston were not perfectly willing that I should go on. I thought he had a right to his opinion."

"And so he must be willing, I judge."

"He says so. He told me on the train, when we were started for Seattle, that he had thought the matter over, and he didn't see why I might not keep on being active and useful, even though I had 'done him the honor' of marrying him." Mrs. Houston smiled at the remembrance of this happy adjustment

of her uncertainties. "It's quite a conversion for him; but he is really sincere, and he wants me to do as I wish. I'm more grateful to him than I can say."

"It means a lot, I know." Isabel had entered very seriously into the complications of the Houston family problem, for she realized that it had a larger significance than the mere comfort or mental ease of two or three people. It bore a relation to the way in which women are regulating their lives at the present day.

Mrs. Houston went on, explaining how she had succeeded in engaging a competent maid — she didn't want a Chinaman around the house; and how she had taken some steps for the furnishing of the rooms.

"Oh, tell me about it!" exclaimed Isabel.

Half an hour later, they were still deep in the discussion of rugs and chintzes and mirrors and Chinese embroideries, when they came out of the tent, and found Stephen strolling up from the work-camp.

"Let's take this young man up on the cliff and show him the view," said Mrs. Houston in her friendly way.

They climbed up to the promontory, which was a favorite look-out. After fifteen minutes of talk about the view and the valley and the weir, Mrs. Houston said cheerfully to Stephen, "I've just been settling my problems to my satisfaction, and telling Isabel about how things have come out." In a few words she related the result of the trip to Seattle. And then she said in a manner which many young

people had found invited confidences, "Isabel said that you had a problem to settle, too."

"I have," said Stephen in his straightforward way. "I've been thinking about it pretty hard since I've met these college folks, and heard them talk of what college does for them. I'd kept putting off facing the thing, but now I see I've got to." It was a long speech, and he flushed as he spoke.

"What do you *want* to do?" asked Mrs. Houston, turning to look at him. "I think it's always just as well to face our own real desires and ambitions, and then see how near we can come to them."

"Well," Stephen was doubtful — "I thought I ought not to leave my father and mother alone on the ranch. They've been good to me, and it seems as if I could give up something for them."

"Do you mean you're going to stay on the ranch from now on, without going any further with your education?" asked Isabel, as gently as she could, not wishing to belittle such a project if it appeared to be best for all who were concerned.

"I don't know." The boy's face was troubled. "Of course it seems too bad not to have any more education than I have; but if I stay on the ranch and break horses, and ride around for strays, I don't need to know anything about trigonometry and French and sociology, do I?" He hid his real feelings under a grin.

"Perhaps not," admitted Mrs. Houston. "But are you really satisfied to give up studying now?"

"No, he isn't, and Mrs. Clark isn't going to be satisfied to have him do it, either," burst out Isabel.

"I never saw any one who believed in education more

than she does. She wants you to have as good an education as you can afford to get. She wouldn't be happy to have you settle down on the ranch, much as she wants you to be with her."

"I know she wouldn't," said Stephen bluntly. He was throwing pebbles over the edge of the cliff. "But she's had a kind of a lonely life — I can see that now, and if I could make it easier by staying —"

Isabel was thinking of Meta's struggle last year; of her intention of sacrificing herself, and the way in which her renunciation had proved unnecessary. "Your mother wouldn't accept such a sacrifice from you," she said.

"I can't leave them altogether, can I?" muttered the youth. "Just cut them off, and go and shift for myself?"

"Why, no." Isabel was thinking fast. "But oh, Stephen! Listen. At Jefferson we have one of the finest agricultural schools in the country — a part of the University, you know. Why don't you come on to Jefferson, this fall, and take the Agricultural Course — the part that deals with horses and cattle and dry-farming, and all that — it's really splendid — and then when you've finished, you can come back and go in for ranching on a larger scale —"

"Jiminy!" cried the lad. "That sounds good."

"It's a good-enough idea, Isabel," interposed Mrs. Houston; "only we must be careful not to force our ideas on Stephen, but let him do as he honestly thinks best. People should be left as free as possible, without suggestions and urgings."

Stephen was gazing absorbedly down the valley. He had not heard what Mrs. Houston had said. "I wonder if I could do it?" he was saying. "I wonder if it would be right, and if —"

"You'd like it at Jefferson," Isabel remarked, trying to curb her enthusiasm. "There's so much freedom and democracy there; it isn't so narrow and cramped as some of the colleges, and the students have such good times. There's a lot of outdoor life — walking, and rowing, and sailing, and ski-ing, and canoeing, and ice-boating; and then the baseball, and football, and track athletics. You'd like it all, tremendously."

"Gee! I guess I would. But I'd be scared stiff of the professors and the classes and the examinations and things. I'd be making a donkey of myself, three-fourths of the time!"

"No, you wouldn't. You'd have just as good a chance as any other fellow."

"It would be great." Stephen had a dazzled look.

"He doesn't have to make up his mind just at this minute," consoled Mrs. Houston. "It's really an important question."

"There are lots of things to be thought about," breathed Stephen.

"Money?" asked the older woman quietly. "There's always that to consider."

"I have some," the young man said. "My — er — relatives in Michigan have sent me a little every year, and it's been put in the bank; and then there was that that father got from the

Express Company, when we caught the robbers — that the Company gave him, I mean. Father turned it over to me, and it's been in the bank all this time — more than six years. It isn't an awful lot, all added together, but it would be a beginning."

"Yes, indeed." This from Isabel.

"Perhaps I could do something to earn a little extra. Don't some of the fellows do that?"

"Loads of them. Why, there are some that earn every single cent, but I think that's too hard. It makes life too much of a grind."

"But with what I have to begin on," said Stephen vaguely.

"Won't your father insist on giving you something?" asked Mrs. Houston.

"Probably. But I don't want to take any more than I can help. He needs all he can make."

"It's nice to be independent," Mrs. Houston conceded, looking at Isabel. "Nobody realizes that better than I do."

"Anyhow, if they are willing that you should go to Jefferson, you won't hang back too much, will you?" said Isabel to Stephen.

"No. Not if we can fix it up so that it'll be satisfactory all round."

"I believe you can," said Mrs. Houston.

They clambered down from the promontory, feeling that some progress had been made. Stephen was to write and tell them how things came out, when he had talked with his foster-parents on the ranch.

The next morning Stephen rode away, anxious to

come to a conclusion with regard to his career. "See you in Jefferson, probably," he said in a low voice to Isabel, as he said good-by.

"It won't be long," Isabel returned. "Perhaps you can go East on the same train that we do."

"I'd like that."

"And, you know, we'd help you get started in college — show you about, and tell you how to do things. It would make it a lot easier. And of course we could help you to get acquainted. And then there's Fanny" — Isabel teased him a bit; "you know you're anxious to meet her."

"I'd be awfully afraid of her," insisted Stephen, blushing.

"Well, you'll see." They shook hands, and the young man turned to say good-by to the others.

Isabel and Mrs. Houston watched as he rode down the valley. "I feel that this isn't the last we'll see of Stephen," said Isabel. "I feel just as sure of seeing him in Jefferson as if we were there now."

"Probably you're right," answered Mrs. Houston. "I haven't a doubt that he can work it out."

A day or two passed with the resumption of the old relations at the village. The time for staying was short, and every one wanted to make the most of it. Little was said about the future, but there was a good deal of private thinking going on.

And now another incident took place, which gave an exciting touch to these last days of indecision.

The Hurd children, Rose and Freddy, were spending Sunday with the Villagers. They had been pampered and teased and amused for the better part

of the day, and now they were playing by themselves at a little distance from the cabins, and beyond the rivulet which flowed into the larger stream. In this section of the hillside, which verged toward the work-camp, was the old sand-pit from which the engineers had taken the sand for the concrete of the first weir.

Some of the workmen had gone on a tramp to Martaville for purposes of their own, and some had gone to bathe in the cold waters of the stream, where it widened, a half-mile below. Mrs. Houston, her husband, and Meta had strolled up the gulch, to talk over some of their plans for the rest of the summer and fall. The two young men were stretched with magazines on the grass of the Promised Land; for a rough bridge now replaced that which had been swept away.

Isabel, satisfied that the children were safely diverting themselves with a "playhouse" marked out by small stones into various imaginary rooms, was also glancing into a fresh magazine which tempted her by its illustrations. She sat on a rock where she could hear the youngsters and keep in touch with them.

After a while she became conscious of a stillness, a cessation of the low busy voices of the children at play. The sudden quiet had something ominous in it. Isabel remembered that through and underneath her concentration upon the magazine she had heard a sliding noise and a stifled cry. Now they resounded like thunder in her brain. She started up and took two steps, to where she could see the spot on which the children had been crouching, arranging

the partitions of their imaginary dwelling. Rose and Freddy had disappeared.

Sweeping the vicinity in apprehension, Isabel's eye lighted on the place where the sand had been dug out from the hillside. There was a fresh rift there like a new scar. The sand was slipping in a leisurely way down the top of the recently augmented pile.

For an instant Isabel was powerless to move. Then she gave a wild choking scream. "Rodney! George!" she cried. "Come — come quickly! Oh, come, come!"

The two young men came running, clattering across the unsteady bridge. "What is it?" they shouted as they came.

"Oh, the children — Freddy and Rose! They're buried under the sand. Oh, save them! save them!"

A whiteness settled over the face of Rodney. He groaned. "We'll try," he said sternly.

"Shovels! picks!" George was saying. "The men — oh, they're all gone, aren't they? We'll have to do it alone, Rod."

The two young men ran swiftly to the work-shacks for their implements. They began digging frenziedly. Isabel stood half-dazed, saying to herself, "It can't be — it can't be too late."

A shovel struck something hard. "The log supports," muttered Rodney. "We must pry them up. I'll get a crowbar." But George had already dashed for it, and Rodney went on digging like a madman.

George came back with the heavy bar. They inserted it under a log. It gave a little and then

sprang back. Isabel, breathing hard, stood pinching her hands tight together in her effort to keep from crying out. The boys bent to their task, working methodically and rapidly. Drops of sweat stood on their foreheads. They were silent except for low words of caution or direction. They succeeded in prying up, one by one, the heavy logs which had supported the opening of the pit. "I can't bear it," Isabel was whispering with stiff lips.

"Ah-h!" George gave a long exclamation. Stepping nearer, Isabel saw a little hand protruding from the space under the frame-work. "Easy, easy, ee-asy," George kept murmuring. Cautiously, slowly, so as not to dislodge any of the precarious masses of sand and rock, the prying and digging went on. And then, all at once, George was lifting Rose tenderly out of the hollow where she lay. She hung limp in his arms. He bent his face over hers, looking for signs of life.

Isabel was shaking so much that she could scarcely move forward toward the child. "Is she — is she —?" The stammering words would not shape themselves.

"I don't think so," answered George calmly. "She's not crushed. The logs protected her. It's lack of air."

He laid the child on the grass, and began the motions of artificial respiration. Rhythmically, unhurriedly, his strong hands raised and lowered the little arms. He glanced over at Rodney, who was still at the work of finding the younger child. Then he lowered his eyes to his task.

"She's breathing," he said with satisfaction.

"Now, Isabel, you look after her. I've got to help Rod. He can't lift those things alone."

Isabel took his place at the head of the prostrate little form, and went through the motions. She dared not look to see how the rescue of Freddy was progressing. Rose breathed irregularly for a few minutes, then gasped and wheezed, then took a long natural breath. The child stirred and whimpered. Isabel took her into her own arms and held her close.

Not till then did she see that the young engineers had finished their labors and were lifting the boy out of the dark hole under the scaffolding. Crouched on the earth, with Rose clutching at her shoulders, she watched the men working to restore the little lad to life. There was an endless moment of uncertainty — Isabel never knew how long. There was a horrible stillness, broken by the incessant chatter and bubble of the stream, and the almost inaudible words of the men. Isabel looked about at the silent slopes, bright in the afternoon sun, the somnolent and un-pitying quiescence of the mountains. Through her mind was running the thought, over and over, "*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*" They seemed almost ironical, for the great mountains were indifferent to any human tragedy going on below.

Then it came to the girl's clarified mind that the *hills* were not mere heights of stone, but a high understanding of spiritual things, like the "mount" from which the greatest sermon in the world had been preached. "God is here," she whispered, and felt at peace. She sat down, and held Rose against her breast, taking care that the little girl's eyes

should not search out the form of her small brother. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

Rose nodded, her lips trembling. "Something came tumbling down," she quavered; "and it was all dark."

"But it's light, now," Isabel replied in a soothing tone. "See how the sun shines. In a few minutes we'll go into the house. One of the men will carry you."

"Can't I walk?" asked Rose doubtfully.

"Of course you can. But it would be rather nice to ride, wouldn't it?"

"Yes." Rose settled back and closed her eyes.

Isabel glanced over her shoulder. She had heard a low word of relief from Rodney. Her heart jumped. Another glance showed her that the little boy had moved, and that he was spluttering and gasping. A glow of thankfulness filled her soul.

"Where's Freddy?" Rose was trying to twist about.

"He's all safe. We found him, too," Isabel soothed her. "Look! Do you see that big magpie over there? Watch for the white under his wings when he flies."

Another look over her shoulder showed the girl that Freddy, dirty and ragged, was sitting up, and leaning against the stooping George, who was speaking words of encouragement: "That's the boy! All right, eh? Fine as silk. Here, take hold of my hand. See how safe you are. Nothing to be scared of!"

"All serene here, Isabel," called Rodney in a queer strained voice. "How's Rose?"

"As good as new." Isabel tried to laugh, but a sob came in her throat. "I hope I'm not going to have hysterics," she thought fearfully.

"We'd better take them to the house now," George was saying in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'll carry this young sport, and Rod will carry Rose." He lifted the boy into his arms. The color had come back into the young man's face, but he was streaked and smeared with dirt and sweat, and his wavy auburn hair lay wet and dark along his forehead.

Rodney came over and stood beside Isabel. There was still a whiteness about his lips. "How's our little girl?" he asked, looking down at Rose.

"I don't think she's hurt a bit, Rod." The girl looked up and tried to smile.

"That's good." Rodney eyed Isabel anxiously. "Pretty rough on you," he said. "All used up?"

"No, not at all," Isabel answered with a briskness which she did not feel. "I'm so relieved — just a trifle shaky —"

The young man leaned over and took Rose into his arms. George had already gone on with Freddy. Isabel tried to get up, and then she sank back again. She was conscious that Rodney was speaking, but his voice sounded far off, and she could not distinguish his words. At last she opened her eyes. Rodney was staring at her. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"No, not a thing. I'll go with you to the house." She got up, surprised to find herself strong and clear of mind. She and Rodney made their way to the Ritz. George was there before them, and had put Freddy down in a canvas chair. The lad was a

sorry object. His clothes were torn and splotted with dirt, his stockings in ribbons, his legs bruised and grimy. He was crying a bit, from fright and relief combined. Rose's gingham dress was still intact, though she had a red scratch along her knee. On the whole, she seemed to have been the more fortunate in the painful affair.

Isabel hurried to wash the dirt from the two little faces, and to bring hot milk for the youngsters to drink. "Think they're really all right?" asked Rodney at the door of the cabin.

"I'm sure they are." Isabel spoke reassuringly, for she felt certain that the children had suffered no great injury. "There are no bones broken, and no serious bruises or cuts. I think it's marvelous, the way they've come out of it."

"Splendid! isn't it?" The young man's face lighted.

"If you and George hadn't known what to do —" Isabel had a catch in her voice. "You two certainly distinguished yourselves."

"What else could we do?" asked Rodney in surprise.

"I don't know. But you surely had presence of mind."

"I hope our minds are always present," the young man answered simply.

Isabel went back to the children, and busied herself with repairing as best she could the torn clothing which they wore, and in tying up the slight contusions which revealed themselves. Rose and Freddy had now been convinced that they were safe and uninjured; they got up and ran about, losing their fright,

and giggling somewhat sorrily at each other's looks.

By the time that the Houstons came back from their walk, the cabins had settled down to quiet and assurance, and the men had gone to gather up their tools and wash the signs of their exploit from their own hands and faces. There was nothing for the Houstons to do except marvel and express their gratitude for the deliverance of the children.

"I thought we had had all the adventures we were going to," sighed Isabel. "There didn't seem to be anything else left."

"I think this is the last," said Mrs. Houston soberly; "unless —" she looked over whimsically at Meta and George, who were talking in the doorway, oblivious to the presence of the others. George had just come back, clean, from the tent.

Isabel's eyes sought the lady's questioningly. Her gaze asked silently, "Has anything happened?"

"Not yet," murmured Mrs. Houston, "but I suspect —"

Isabel had had her suspicions herself, although Meta had preserved a dignified quietness in regard to her feelings toward George Burnham. The next evening, after supper, Meta and George walked out along the stream toward the ascending valley. Mr. and Mrs. Houston sat down in the tent for the game of pinochle which they liked before the later gathering around the camp-fire.

Rodney and Isabel busied themselves with getting the fuel piled up ready for the match; and then, as the sky darkened and nobody came, they kindled the heap, and sat back to watch it flare up in the dusk. Just then George and Meta stepped into the circle of

the light. Isabel could not see their faces clearly, but she felt something unusual in their pose and manner. They did not reply to Rodney's fluent greeting, but George said in as commonplace a tone as he could command, "Well, Rod, I've decided about Chelford's offer."

"What's the decree?" asked Rodney eagerly.

"I'm going to accept."

"And stay out here — a year?" Rodney spoke evenly, looking across the fire at George, who seemed unusually tall in the flickering glare.

"Yes; or until they call us to go to France."

Isabel was searching Meta's face. The older girl seemed radiant in the fire-light. "We'll miss you in Jefferson, George," said Isabel.

"I hope so. I'd hate to be forgotten." George glanced sidewise at Meta.

"I congratulate you, old fellow," said Rodney heartily. "I thought you couldn't resist. I never had any idea, until lately, how the West holds one. It's almost impossible to get away."

"It's fascinating, all right. And the offer's all right. *And* I hope to make good, now that I have my chance." George spoke with the exuberance of the young man who sees many wonderful things before him. "And Meta —"

"We're going to tell the family about it," said Meta quickly. There was something in her voice that sent a thrill through the heart of Isabel.

The two young people moved away, out of the circle of the fire. But as they went, George turned back to remark, "And Meta and I have come to another decision, too. She — that is, I — we're

going to be — that is, we're engaged!" They hurried up the slope to the tent, before Rodney and Isabel had found anything to say.

Isabel drew a long breath. "Well, it comes as a kind of surprise," she said faintly, "even though we've been expecting it. How happy they looked. It's splendid, isn't it, Rod?"

"Very," said Rodney. He was looking hard into the fire.

Isabel hardly knew what to say next. She sat without speaking, dwelling in her thoughts on this beautiful thing which had come to Meta. It was a cause for rejoicing, but already she and her friend seemed separated — not quite the same.

"I've come to my decision," announced Rodney at last. He was breaking twigs nervously and tossing them into the flame.

"Oh, what?" said Isabel. "You aren't going to stay here, too, are you — just because George is?"

"No. I'm going back. It's best for me to spend one more year in school, and finish. I see that perfectly."

"I thought so, all along," ventured the girl; "but I didn't like to say so." She felt a sense of exultation at knowing that Rodney would be back in Jefferson next year. There might come a time when he would be very far away — in France; or farther. "I'm awfully glad, Rod."

"I'm sure it's best. I've had some fine experience, and I'll have more before the summer is over. But college is something that one has to see through to the end. There's no use in lying down on the job."

Isabel drew a long breath again. She had not realized how the uncertainty had worried her. "You won't regret it," she responded. "One never does." There was another silence; and then Isabel, with a sensitiveness which had been enhanced by George's words and Meta's radiant air, felt something vibrating unsaid. Terror took hold of her. She felt that she must get up and run into the cabin which was her home. She hesitated, ready for flight.

Rodney was speaking,— "Isabel, why can't we —?"

The girl put out a hand to stop him. "Oh, no, Rodney," she begged softly. "Wait. Not now."

The fire lighted the young man's eyes as he turned and looked at her. "Well — some other time," said Rodney.

THE END

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